

“EITHER OF TIME OR GRACE”: TRANSFORMATION AND REVIVAL ON
ST KILDA, 1822-1844

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My excuse is that the history of Scotland is too important to be left exclusively to
Scottish Historians.

— Alec Ryrie, *The Origins of the Scottish Reformation*, viii

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ABSTRACT

This work examines the religious revival on the Scottish island of St. Kilda in 1841-1842. Between 1822 and 1830, Rev. John MacDonald of Ferintosh gradually introduced the evangelical form of Protestant Christianity to the people of St. Kilda. From 1830 to 1841, Rev. Neil MacKenzie further transformed the faith and culture of the island through his holistic approach to ministry. The resultant revival, though locally unique, manifested itself in a number of ways common to other portions of contemporary and historical Scottish evangelicalism.

INTRODUCTION

An investigation and analysis of the St. Kilda revival is important for a number of reasons. For one, it has never been done as an end in itself. Although many of the revival movements on the surrounding Hebridean islands have received significant attention from both scholars and hobbyists, the St. Kilda revival has only been written about as a piece of the larger story of St. Kildan church history. Although the recent work of Michael Robson lays phenomenal contextual foundations and discusses the revival in more depth than most, it nevertheless fails to appreciate the revival within the field of revival and awakening studies that continues to grow as historians and theologians assess these complex, multifaceted religious movements. Further, the religious history of the island has been susceptible to misrepresentation and generalization. It is the present author's sincere hope that the current project will contribute to the more scholarly body of work on St. Kilda. Finally, this thesis seeks to show that the St. Kildans were, though distinct in many ways, nevertheless not as removed from the general Hebridean and Scottish ways of life as many of the accounts make it seem. Though remote, St. Kilda was not a backwater map dot devoid of inter-regional and international interaction and characteristics.

The most critical sources for this thesis are the journals of Rev. John MacDonald of Ferintosh; the memoirs of Rev. Neil MacKenzie, printed by his son in 1911; the memoirs of Callum MacQueen, a St. Kildan who emigrated to Australia in the decade following the revival; contemporary revival narratives from both the Isle of Skye and

Lowland parish of Kilsyth; and the collected addresses of Lowland Evangelical¹ ministers who gathered to discuss the nature of revival in 1840. Although an admittedly small number of sources to work with in contrast to those of mainland revivals with newspaper coverage and extensive chronicling, I believe that the material will prove sufficient for the purposes at hand.

The following chapters address the revival primarily in a twofold way to account for the local and external factors. Chapter One begins with a brief survey of St. Kildan cultural and ecclesiastical history and historiography. It then examines the preparatory role played by the Gaelic-speaking itinerant preacher John MacDonald of Ferintosh through his four trips to the island in the 1820s. Chapter Two examines the life and times of Rev. Neil MacKenzie, analyzes the revival of 1841-42, and assesses the impact of evangelicalism and revival on the island as a whole. Chapter Three draws connections between St. Kilda and the contemporary outside world by exploring MacKenzie's links beyond the island and comparing the revival to others within the region and the nation. Finally, Chapter Four attempts to provide a broad historical and historiographical survey to further frame the contemporary events discussed in Chapters One through Three.

¹ For the duration of the thesis, "Evangelical" will refer specifically to the party within the Church of Scotland, while "evangelical" will relate to the broader movement. See Chapter Four for further clarification.

CHAPTER ONE

ST. KILDA SETTING AND MACDONALD OF FERINTOSH

Upon being presented to the people by the Rev. John MacDonald of Ferintosh in 1830 as the minister of St. Kilda, the Rev. Neil MacKenzie immediately knew that his goal of providing his parishioners with an orthodox Calvinist and deeply pietistic evangelical ministry would not come easily or quickly. But he stayed. He rolled up his sleeves and immersed himself in the lives and worldviews of the people of St. Kilda. Weeks turned into months, months into years, and on the evening of Wednesday May 28th, 1841, a revival began in the oil-lit church.¹ For thirteen-year-old islander Callum MacQueen, it was something he would never forget. Reminiscing in his later life, having emigrated to Australia in 1852, he vividly recounted:

I remember Mrs. Gillies crying. There were nine or ten men in the meeting. I afterward heard one of the men telling some who were arriving with the boats from their day's work: "I believe the Spirit of God was poured upon our congregation tonight." This was the beginning of the revival.²

The revival that began that night continued on into the next year and had a profound effect on the life of the island.

But it was more than a single event that caused such an effect. The occurrences of 1841 and 1842, as important and critical as they are to the present work, were just the tip of the iceberg. Callum MacQueen, earlier in his memoirs, makes the important distinction that what happened in 1841 was "a great revival," while "religious revival" had been an ongoing phenomenon on the island since the arrival of John MacDonald of Ferintosh in

¹ J.B. (John Bannatyne) MacKenzie, *Episode in the Life of the Rev. Neil MacKenzie at St. Kilda from 1829 to 1843* (Privately Printed, 1911), 33-34.

² E.G. McQueen and K. McQueen, eds., *St. Kilda Heritage: Autobiography of Callum MacCuithinn (Malcolm MacQueen)* (Edinburgh: The Scottish Genealogy Society, 1995), 15.

1822 on his first of four evangelistic preaching visits.³ This first chapter, then, is dedicated to those people, ideas, and events exclusively on the island of St. Kilda between 1822 and 1830, the year that MacKenzie arrived at his new island charge. It recounts the ways in which the church on the island began to shift from an externally associated institution of religious provision and transaction to the nexus of St. Kildan cultural transformation, as MacDonald introduced evangelicalism and the worldviews of both people and pastor interacted over time.⁴

St. Kilda Setting

In order to appreciate the impacts of MacDonald and MacKenzie, let alone the revival of 1841-42, it is critical to understand the St. Kildan context. Politically, economically, religiously, and socially, the people of St. Kilda inhabited a particular reality that shaped the way in which they translated experience and viewed the world. Consequently, all of these sub-contexts were subject to the paradigm shift that occurred through the MacDonald-MacKenzie era.

One of the first things scholars note when beginning a discussion of St. Kilda is the vastness of published material for such a small and remote place.⁵ Despite this, several key texts help to provide background, including: Mary Harman's *An Isle Called Hirte: History and Culture of the St. Kildans to 1930*; Bob Chambers' edited collection *Rewriting St. Kilda: New Views on Old Ideas*; Bill Lawson's *St. Kilda and its Church: A*

³ Ibid., 14.

⁴ The themes and language of transformation and indigenization are also developed in Andrew Fleming, *St. Kilda and the Wider World: Tales of an Iconic Island* (Bollington, Cheshire: Windgather Press Ltd, 2005), 123; Donald Meek, "'Eileanaich Cian a' Chuain' / 'The Remote Islanders of the Sea'? Towards a Reexamination of the Role of Church and Faith in St. Kilda," in *Rewriting St. Kilda: New Views on Old Ideas*, ed. Bob Chambers (Isle of Lewis: The Islands Book Trust, 2010), 115.

⁵ This issue is dealt with in depth in the recent collection *Rewriting St. Kilda: New Views on Old Ideas*, ed. Bob Chambers (Isle of Lewis: The Islands Book Trust, 2010).

Hebridean Church in its Historical Setting; David Quine's work on the island; Michael Robson's *St. Kilda: Church, Visitors and 'Natives'*; and Andrew Fleming's *St. Kilda and the Wider World: Tales of an Iconic Island*.⁶ Some of the more popular published works, on the other hand, often contribute to the perpetuation of old ideas.⁷ These primarily include the work of Charles MacLean and Tom Steel, who variously represent the

⁶ Most of these authors are noted as "exemplary" in Donald Meek's survey of the religious literature, "'Eileanaich Cian a' Chuain' / 'The Remote Islanders of the Sea'? Towards a Reexamination of the Role of Church and Faith in St. Kilda," in *Rewriting St. Kilda: New Views on Old Ideas*, ed. Bob Chambers (Isle of Lewis: The Islands Book Trust, 2010), 91. Fleming's *St. Kilda and the Wider World: Tales of an Iconic Island* (Bollington, Cheshire: Windgather Press Ltd, 2005) is not mentioned. However, it has been incredibly helpful and formative in my own assessment.

⁷ The best full surveys of the historiography of the island are Meek, "'Eileanaich Cian a' Chuain' / 'The Remote Islanders of the Sea'? Towards a Reexamination of the Role of Church and Faith in St. Kilda," and Lawson, "Hiort in Pre-1930 Writings – An Overview," both in the 2005 Chambers collection. Each author makes several important points. Lawson notes that external accounts, most notably those of Martin Martin in 1697 and Lord Brougham in 1799, began to perpetuate a view of the islanders as "savages" and other terms indicating lack of refinement and "civilization" (8-15). During MacKenzie's time on the island, the external accounts included those of Lachlan MacLean, Frederic Mercey, and James Wilson, which were primarily descriptive, though not entirely unsullied with opinions (18-20). Beyond these accounts, "we are into a period where the writings about St. Kilda concentrate less on the marvels of the islands, ... but more on the politics of the community." These include John Sands (1877), Robert Connell (1887), John MacDiarmid (1878), and George Seton (1878) (22-25). Meek has much more to say on the issue, especially regarding the church on the island. He notes that the "difficulty" of assessing "the role of church and faith on St. Kilda" is due to: the "over-exposed" nature "of the centrality of the church" in writings about St. Kilda after 1820, the absence of good scholarship on the topic until "Michael Robson's landmark volume," and the lack of local "voice" in "popular accounts" (90-92). He further notes how two of these accounts (Sands and Connell) portrayed the church and minister in such a negative light as to plumb "the very nadir of bad taste, even by today's tabloid standards" (93-95). Until recently, Meek claims, much of the work on St. Kilda was subject to "St. Kilda-ism," whereby the external interpreter fails to consider the "voice" of the St. Kildans themselves (96-97). Meek goes on to note three factors that "contribute to the manner in which the Christian faith ... is evaluated and its impact assessed": 1) "The assessor's own espousal, or rejection, of the Christian faith, or of particular expressions of that faith"; 2) "Academic/theoretical schools of thought and discipline," i.e. the views of an anthropologist vs. a missions historian; and 3) "Breadth of perspective," both geographically and culturally (97-100). As for the trends in viewing the church on the island, the first stage was what Meek calls the "faith and flag" approach, whereby "non-Gaelic commentators ... were prone to treat the islanders much on the same basis as ... South Sea islanders." He points out here and elsewhere that it is critical to view St. Kilda within the broader Hebridean religious context. Another trend, that of "present-day anthropologists' perspectives," tended to paint the missionary or minister in a highly negative light, a characteristic shared with both a handful of nineteenth-century visitors and tourists (such as Sands and Connell) and even more critical modern authors such as MacLean (1977) and Steel (1965). Meek also acknowledges a handful of "scholarly pro-faith perspectives." (102-138). Perhaps the most crucial piece of Meek's article is a challenge he provides to those who seek to continue studying and writing on the church on St. Kilda. First, he hopes that a certain measure of "neutral ground" can be maintained by whoever begins a "new analysis" of the topic. Second, he makes clear that a primary research question for these new analyses must ask the question, "How did St. Kilda fit into, or differ from, the wider patterns of the Highlands and Hebrides?" (143). As for the current work, the first challenge will be faced throughout, and the second challenge will be picked up primarily in the second and third chapters.

ministers on the island as “holy bigots” and culture killers.⁸ Thankfully, these works have become less popular with the rise of more critical scholarship and reexamination of local evidence. It is primarily to works of this critical ilk that we now turn to examine the context of St. Kilda.

Geographical and Political Context

St. Kilda is an archipelago in the Atlantic Ocean, 66 miles west of the Isle of Harris in the Outer Hebrides of Scotland. The insular formation contains one large island, known locally as Hirta (or Hirte); as well as three smaller islands: Soay, Boreray, and Dun; and two large rock outcroppings known as stacks: Stac Lee and Stac an Armin. Hirta and St. Kilda are often synonymous in the literature about the island, as it was Hirta that contained the human inhabitants up until 1930 when the last St. Kildans emigrated away.⁹

Politically, it is helpful to think about the island in a three-tiered manner. At the broadest level, the island is a part of the nation of Scotland and, following the unifications of 1603 and 1707, Great Britain. Prior to the modern era, St. Kilda fell within the territory of the powerful MacDonald clan, known as the Lords of the Isles.¹⁰

At the regional level, the landowners following the MacDonald clan were the MacLeod chiefs of Harris and Dunvegan, Skye.¹¹ The ownership of St. Kilda, following the initial transfer to the MacLeods in the sixteenth century, changed hands several times.

⁸ The use of “holy bigot” is in Charles MacLean, *Island on the Edge of the World: Utopian St. Kilda and Its Passing* (London: Tom Stacy Ltd., 1972) and quoted by Meek in “‘Eileanaich Cian a’ Chuain’ / ‘The Remote Islanders of the Sea’? Towards a Reexamination of the Role of Church and Faith in St. Kilda,” 132. Tom Steel’s attribution of cultural death to the clergyman is in *The Life and Death of St. Kilda* (Edinburgh: R & R Clark, 1965), 77-78.

⁹ Mary Harman, *An Isle Called Hirte: History and Culture of the St. Kildans to 1930* (MacLean Press: Isle of Skye, 1997), 1, 4.

¹⁰ Bill Lawson, *St. Kilda and Its Church: A Hebridean Church in Its Historical Setting* (Isle of Harris: Bill Lawson Publications, 1993), 4.

¹¹ Ibid.

The MacLeods of Dunvegan sold the island, along with Harris, to the enterprising Captain Alexander MacLeod of Berneray in 1779. His heirs sold the island to another MacLeod, Lieut. Col. Donald of Auchnagoyle, in 1804. The island was then repurchased by the Dunvegan MacLeods.¹² The National Trust currently owns the island and it falls within the jurisdiction of the Western Isles Council (*Comvairle nan Eilean*).¹³

At the local level, the MacLeod owners throughout the majority of the island's history would send a steward, or tacksman, to collect rent from the islanders. This task fell to members of the Clann Alasdair Ruaidh MacLeod until the last tenant emigrated to America in 1773.¹⁴ During the time of MacDonald and MacKenzie, the stewards were: Murdoch MacLellan (1821-1827), Lachlan MacKinnon of Corry (1827, perhaps kept interest into 1830s), MacLellan again (ca. 1828-1830), Donald MacDonald of Lochinver (1830s), and Norman MacRaidl (ca. 1842-1873).¹⁵ On the island itself, the distribution of power was astonishingly egalitarian. As the islanders lived the majority of their years without contact from the outside world or the tenant who came in the summer to collect, the only figures of authority on the island were the tenant's ground officer and the clergyman, if present.¹⁶

Island Economy

The people of St. Kilda paid rent in kind until around 1850, when a cash economy began to develop.¹⁷ Depending on who the tacksman was and how generous he felt, the people might have plenty or be in want. In the period of MacDonald and MacKenzie,

¹² Bill Lawson, "Hiort in Pre-1930 Writings – An Overview," in *Rewriting St. Kilda: New Views on Old Ideas*, ed. Bob Chambers (South Lochs, Isle of Lewis: The Islands Book Trust, 2011), 7-15.

¹³ Harman, *Hirte*, 1.

¹⁴ Lawson, "Hiort," 14.

¹⁵ Harman, *Hirte*, 99-102.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 94-95.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 134.

they were typically well off.¹⁸ Despite the communitarian ethos of the island, there was economic variance among families. For example, Harman notes that some families had more cows, some fewer, and some none. The poor and widows were taken care of by the community and bore a lighter load of financial responsibility. At the other end of the spectrum, more prominent families, like that of John Ferguson in the nineteenth century, were not uncommon.¹⁹ The land was divided among the islanders for pasturing and crop growth along the run-rig system, whereby the common land was re-divided every three years.²⁰ This process, we will see, was changed during Neil MacKenzie's incumbency. Fuel was typically cut peat or turf from the island's hills and valleys, though at times it became scarce. The staples of the St. Kildan diet were barley, oats, cheese, mutton, beef, seabird, potatoes, and seabird eggs. They ate twice or thrice daily and used a local sauce called giben, made from seabird fat, to season their dishes.²¹ Not surprisingly, the main agricultural products of the island were cattle, wool from the sheep on the island, seabirds such as gannets, fulmars, and auks, barley, and feathers. At a time there were horses, and for some of the island's history, dogs and cats lived on the island. Despite their location, fishing was uncommon.²²

Religious History to 1820

A working knowledge of the religious history is critical in order to fully appreciate the impact of MacDonald and MacKenzie. As the names of two of the three older church buildings noted by Alexander Buchan in the 18th century were St Columba's

¹⁸ Ibid., 172.

¹⁹ Ibid., 132-136.

²⁰ A.C. O'Dell and K. Walton, *The Highlands and Islands of Scotland* (Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., 1962), 321.

²¹ Harman, *Hirte*, 164-175.

²² Ibid., 176-226.

and St Brendan's, it is typically held that Christianity reached St. Kilda during the Middle Ages as part of the spreading Celtic church.²³ Sixteenth-century accounts include both visiting priests and occupant clergy providing for the faith of the islanders. However, a 1615 visit from Coll MacDonald found the people seriously wanting in religious knowledge.²⁴ Following the publicized account of Martin Martin in 1697 that included the Coll MacDonald story, Alexander Buchan went out to the island as a Church of Scotland missionary from 1704-1709. He returned from 1710-1727 as a missionary catechist of the newly formed Society in Scotland for Propagating Christian Knowledge (SSPCK).²⁵ Roderick MacLennan followed Buchan from 1730 to 1743.²⁶ Though these men seem to have cared well and honestly for the faith of the St. Kildans, the next eighty years saw a decline in the character of their spiritual leaders.

In 1733, Alexander MacLeod, a lawyer, gifted a considerable sum to the SSPCK. He stipulated, however, that the missionary catechist be someone named MacLeod. As a result, Alexander MacLeod of Skye (1743-1758), Angus MacLeod (1768-1785), and Lauchlan MacLeod (1788-1820) assumed pastoral headship of the islanders in succession.²⁷ As we shall soon see, John MacDonald of Ferintosh found the islanders almost entirely devoid of religious understanding upon his visit of 1822. This makes some sense when taking into consideration the memories of Callum MacQueen, who provided a list of the previous clergymen with his memoirs. He made no note of Alexander MacLeod, the first of the prominent MacLeod missionary catechists. However, when referring to Angus MacLeod, he recalled from a youth on an island of

²³ Lawson, *St. Kilda and Its Church*, 7-8. The third church was called Christ's Church, 7-8.

²⁴ Harman, *Hirte*, 80-85.

²⁵ Lawson, *St. Kilda and Its Church*, 13.

²⁶ Harman, *Hirte*, 90-91.

²⁷ Harman, *Hirte*, 246-248.

oral tradition, “Not a good man; against the people.”²⁸ For Lauchlan MacLeod, the verdict was worse: “His son – no good – drank a lot.”²⁹ When Lauchlan departed St. Kilda in 1821, the people were without religious instruction for a year. In June of 1822, Alexander MacKenzie, a schoolmaster with the Gaelic School Society, began to lead Sabbath meetings.³⁰ MacDonald of Ferintosh would be there in a number of months.

Critically, this phase of St. Kildan church history prior to the arrival of MacDonald and MacKenzie was marked by a deficiency in religious provision. Whether visiting once a year or resident, beyond Buchan and MacLennan there was an essentially transactional character to the church on the island. Although it was officially within the parish of Harris, and then South Uist, the ecclesiastical interactions between church and people were typically short, formal, and otherwise uninvested.³¹ Not until the 1820s would someone take serious interest in their spiritual well-being.

Culture and Society

The St. Kildan culture was a rich culture. Along with the religious component, the social dynamics of the island included a local and regional cosmology, a strong Gaelic oral tradition, music, poetry, and some rudimentary education. As for the number of St. Kildans, in 1727 an epidemic wiped out nearly all of the original adult inhabitants. The island was repopulated following the tragedy with families from other Hebridean islands who were related to the MacLeods. Several of these families went on to establish

²⁸ Malcolm MacQueen, 18.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Harman, *Hirte*, 248.

³¹ Robson, on the period prior to MacDonald of Ferintosh, similarly notes: “All had been out of contact with the SSPCK for most of the time and frequently absent from their charge, so that the islanders had lacked a consistent religious and teaching provision for about three quarters of a century.” *St. Kilda: Church, Visitors and ‘Natives’* (Isle of Lewis: The Islands Book Trust, 2005), 267.

themselves in later years, such as the Fergusons and MacQueens.³² Throughout the era with which this work is primarily concerned, the population remained around 100 persons. In 1822, John MacDonald noted 108. In 1838, the population was down to 92. By the time James Wilson arrived in 1841, there were again 105. By 1851, a few years following MacKenzie's departure, the people numbered 110.³³ As such there was no severe population shift during the ministries of MacDonald and MacKenzie.

Though christianized and officially adherents of the Protestant and Presbyterian Church of Scotland, the people of St. Kilda maintained certain elements of their local culture that exhibited a different cosmology than that of the priests, catechists, and ministers they came to know. This cosmological interaction will be dealt with more fully later in Chapter Two. However, it is important to note some key elements of these folkways. Like the other Celtic peoples around them, they believed in a pre-Christian, or rather non-Christian, supernatural world that included fairies, magical stones, and curative wells – all possessing, in their own experiences, very real power. They also held on to a belief in “second sight,” whereby islanders claimed to have foreseen the deaths of others, and other bad omens involving birds like cuckoos and herons.³⁴

Beyond the more druidic elements, the St. Kildans also enjoyed a number of Christian festivals on the island, though they were noted in 1799 as having been reduced to a more somber ethos. For sport, they played a variation of shinty, a ball-and-stick game common in the Highlands and Islands, and also competed in feats of cragsmanship.³⁵ For entertainment during the winter months, the people developed a rich repertoire of songs

³² Bill Lawson, “Hiort,” 10.

³³ MacLean, *Island on the Edge of the World: Utopian St. Kilda and Its Passing*, 123.

³⁴ Harman, “Hirte,” 227-229.

³⁵ Ibid.

and poems, many of which were recorded by MacKenzie during his life on the island. Dancing was a common pastime among the locals as well, though it seemed to have disappeared with the arrival of the evangelicals.³⁶ Among the men, a daily community meeting, which later became known as the St. Kilda “Parliament,” allowed them to discuss and assess the life of the island as a whole unit and to plan the work for the day.³⁷

Educationally, the island fared much better during and after the era of MacDonald and MacKenzie. Though Buchan and MacLennan had made headway toward a literate St. Kilda in the previous century, by the time schoolteacher Alexander MacKenzie arrived in 1822 he had little to work with.³⁸ In the early autumn, the Rev. John MacDonald of Ferintosh, visited the island at the behest of the SSPCK for the first time. For whatever reason, and the possibilities are ample, MacDonald immediately felt a strong connection to the island and its inhabitants’ spiritual welfare. Although it took nearly two decades to fully manifest in “the great revival,” the arrival of MacDonald signaled the beginning of the end of a merely transactional ministry between the people and clergy on St. Kilda.

Praeparatio Evangelica: Rev. John MacDonald of Ferintosh and the Introduction of an Evangelical Worldview

John MacDonald was born 12 November 1779 in Balnabein, Reay, the son of a weaver-turned-catechist father known as James MacAdie. He went on as a young man to King’s College, Aberdeen. At university, he excelled in mathematics and took an MA in 1801. In 1805 he was licensed by the Presbytery of Caithness, and held several minor church positions until finally being admitted to the parish of Urquhart, or Ferintosh, in

³⁶ Ibid., 237-243.

³⁷ Ibid., 229-230.

³⁸ Ibid., 256.

1813. He was married to Georgina Ross from 1806 until her death in 1814, and then to Jessie MacKenzie from 1818 until his own death in 1849.³⁹ These unions produced a total of ten children. Physically, Iain D. Campbell cites an 1892 C.H. Spurgeon memorial, of all things, that noted “especially a fine pair of eyes” on the Scottish divine. He was also a keen poet in his native Gaelic and wrote through that medium of the laudatory work of the SSPCK. A translated sample reads:

Diligent in the labor
Without abating either their zeal of pity
That the knowledge of the Redeemer
Would spread to a needy people⁴⁰

An ardent evangelical, MacDonald was fond of preaching wherever and whenever a message seemed to be needed. Due to these itinerating efforts, he was reprimanded in 1818. Nevertheless, the man who was compared to George Whitefield and lauded as “Apostle of the North” continued to preach and teach throughout the Highlands and Islands and was central to a number of religious revivals in the region. At the Disruption, he decided for the Free Church and became a leader in the young denomination, serving as Gaelic Moderator in 1845. He died in 1849.⁴¹ This dominant figure within Highland evangelicalism, despite his prominence elsewhere and ability to remain in his own parish at little cost to himself, developed a special sense of care and responsibility for the people of St. Kilda. Was it due, in part, to his bent toward the Romantic and sublime that drove him and other men of culture and standing to wax eloquently over distant, mist-shrouded islands? In part, surely. Whatever his initial motives might have been, however, they

³⁹ Hew Scott, *Fasti Ecclesiae Scotticanae* vol. VII (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1928), 47.

⁴⁰ Both the Spurgeon comparison and the poem from Iain D. Campbell, “Rev. John MacDonald, Ferintosh (1779-1849),” *Banner of Truth*, July 28, 2005, <http://banneroftruth.org/uk/resources/articles/2005/Rev.-john-macdonald-ferintosh-1779-1849/> (accessed February 19, 2014), 2-11.

⁴¹ Scott, *FES*, 47.

would pale in comparison to his impact on the life, culture, and religion on the remote archipelago through his introduction of evangelicalism.⁴²

First Trip: September 1822

With knowledge of his itinerating history and the St. Kildan vacancy following the departure of Lauchlan MacLeod, the Rev. Dr. Campbell of the SSPCK wrote to MacDonald on 8 July of 1822 requesting that he visit the island and tend to its spiritual state.⁴³ MacDonald lost no time. He was on Skye by 4 September and on Harris by the 7th. After preaching at Harris, he set out with the tacksman's party from Ainsay at 4:30 a.m. on Sunday, 15 September.⁴⁴ Although he was hindered by a patch of rough weather, MacDonald managed to write his emotions in a Gaelic poem, part of which read:

Thinking of the island, so remote and lonely, care and sorrow awoke within me, as I remembered the danger of the people. They are as sheep without a shepherd to lead and pastor them; or as a rudderless ship, tossed on the rough billows of the ocean; who can tell what her course may be, or if she may not be dashed on the Rocks? ... Hunger and hardship would I bear, and the dangers of sea and storm would I brave, that I might see the people, and preach to them the gospel of peace.⁴⁵

By 2:00 p.m. they reached St. Kilda, where MacDonald's "heart swelled with gladness" upon sight. As the normal landing area, near the people at Village Bay, was

⁴² I owe the note of MacDonald's Ossianic bent to Campbell, 5-9.

⁴³ John Kennedy, *The "Apostle of the North": The Life and Labours of the Rev. Dr. M'Donald* (London: T. Nelson and Sons, 1932), 111-112, accessed March 9, 2014, http://books.google.com/books?id=JJAEEAAAYAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbg_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false. Kennedy's account of MacDonald is admittedly hagiographic at a number of points. However, and the reason it provides a solid evidentiary basis for MacDonald's time on St. Kilda, Kennedy includes in his narrative the journals that MacDonald kept during his several visits. At the same time, Robson does well to note that MacDonald himself was not free of bias, as he was keenly aware that the journals might be published by the SSPCK. Cf. Robson, *St. Kilda*, 275, 286.

⁴⁴ Kennedy, *Apostle*, 114.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 113. The fact that he wrote in Gaelic, not to mention that it was his first language, seems to push back against the assertion of Michael Robson that "he expressed neither interest in nor admiration for the ancient and rich language used by him in his lectures and sermons and by the simple people who listened to what he said." *St. Kilda*, 297. Donald Meek's assessment that MacDonald was "more than thoroughly familiar with contemporary Gaelic society" and cut from the same cultural cloth, so to speak, supports this reading. "Reexamination," 102-103.

compromised, they were forced to unload from the northeastern side. Never one to let time or trouble stand in the way of his preaching, the minister assembled the islanders and led a service in the schoolhouse at 6:00 p.m.⁴⁶

Upon his arrival, MacDonald was less than pleased with the lack of religious knowledge and experience of the people, despite the previous ministers' efforts. He described their general worldview: "They seem to have a sense in their minds of a Supreme Being, who superintends and governs all things; and they admit also that they are sinners, and merit His displeasure. But they appear to have no correct views as to the method, either of obtaining His favor, or of being qualified for enjoying Him."⁴⁷ To remedy the situation, he set about preaching to and conversing with the St. Kildans over a period of more than a week. His journals provide us with what he experienced and taught.⁴⁸

Having met the islanders and preached in the barn on Sunday evening, MacDonald retired for the night. The following day, Monday 16 September, he set about observing the people at work and talking with them about their culture and stories. Of this culture, he "found that they are fond of receiving and relating news. Endeavored to gratify them as much as I could, and they in return entertained me with all the little tales of their island." He further found that these interactions gave him "readier access to their minds, and enabled me with better effect to introduce, now and then, something about religion." In the evening, he preached two messages. The first was a message on Romans

⁴⁶ Ibid., 114-118.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 110.

⁴⁸ The reader will notice that I pay special attention to the sermon passages and topics in my survey of MacDonald's visits. Previous accounts have noted *that* he preached, but few have taken seriously *what* he preached. By tending to these issues, I hope to draw out a clearer picture of what the minister was proposing and exposing – experientially, biblically, and theologically – to the people of St. Kilda.

3:21 stressing “the nature, the evil, and the extent of sin,” followed by another on Romans 3:19 and Galatians 3:10 “on man’s natural state under the law, as being under the curse.” He noted their response: “They all seemed attentive, and some discovered signs of being affected, as if the view given them of the subject was different from what they had been accustomed to entertain, and had therefore occasioned them some alarm.” On the same night, he laid out his agenda for the visit: “to preach every day, besides catechizing and performing such other duties as might be necessary.”⁴⁹

Although he left no entry for Tuesday, he picks back up on Wednesday, the 16th of September. That day, the men went to the St. Kildan Island of Boreray, and MacDonald continued to wander amidst the rest of the islanders and enter conversations when possible. He managed to have “some conversation with them on religious subjects, and was agreeably surprised at finding that they could repeat many of the questions of the Shorter Catechism, although they understood little of the meaning of them.” His evening sermon Wednesday continued the theme from Monday as he preached Romans 3:20 “on the impossibility of justification by the deeds of the law,” and he again noted slight signs of spiritual affection.⁵⁰

On Thursday the daytime was spent with the tacksman, Murdoch MacLellan, on a trip out to Boreray. He returned in the evening to preach a sermon, as promised. Thursday’s message began to move the gospel narrative, typical of evangelical preaching, beyond the depraved human condition toward what MacDonald considered the key to all reality.⁵¹ He preached Romans 3:21 “on the righteousness of Christ as the ground of the

⁴⁹ Ibid., 118-120.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 120-121.

⁵¹ Robson also notes that MacDonald’s sermon topics “were planned in such a way as might stimulate spiritual progress.” Robson, *St. Kilda*, 281. Cf. fn. 47 above.

sinner's justification," and noted that "some appeared to be deeply impressed, and there was something like a melting under the word. The cross, I see, is that chiefly which moves the sinner."⁵² The next evening, after another day among the people, he continued the theme of redemption. He preached on Romans 3:22 "on the manner of becoming interested in the righteousness of Christ" and noted that "some, both old and young, were affected even to tears." Although he was clearly pleased with these manifestations, he was cautious in his assessment and reminded himself that "We must leave results ... with the Lord."⁵³

On Saturday 21 September, the minister took some time for himself, wandering around the island and planning his Sabbath messages. In the evening, he preached Romans 5:1 "on the effects of justification," but he felt the message "dull and lifeless" both for himself and his audience. He preached twice on Sunday 22 September, once in the forenoon and again in the evening. His forenoon message was from John 16:7-15 "on the work of the Spirit," while his evening message came from John 16:24 on "the duty of prayer." After the first sermon, he noted that "many were affected, and at one time almost all were in tears," but he went on to doubt their authenticity after seeing the people return to a disaffected state. Here, too, he critically noted:

Let none imagine that I here plead for austerity of moroseness in religion. But there is a season in the life of every man, who, after having been thoughtless about salvation, becomes in earnest, and obtains mercy, when he must be sensible of the danger and pierced with sorrow, and on such occasions, when the heart is full the countenance cannot easily conceal it.⁵⁴

In this instance, he roughly outlined his own view of conversion, a crucial piece of the experiential power of evangelical preaching and theology. He also noted in this entry that

⁵² Kennedy., *Apostle*, 121-122.

⁵³ Ibid., 122.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 123-125

he anticipated an increase of conversions with the rise in biblical literacy on the island. In the evening meeting, he baptized the son of John Ferguson, a St. Kildan with whom MacDonald was unusually impressed. He noted of Ferguson: "the only person in the place who can read, at least to any purpose. Found him, therefore, much better acquainted with the principles of Christianity than his neighbors." On Monday evening, he preached 2 Corinthians 5:17 "on being in Christ," which elicited another response of tears from the people. Also of note to him was the willingness of some islanders to secure a space for the sermon despite bad weather.⁵⁵

The next entry, from Wednesday 25 September, recorded that the day was busily spent by the people conducting business with their tenant, MacLellan. MacDonald's evening sermon, again from 2 Corinthians 5:17 "on the new creature," garnered yet another emotional response.⁵⁶ The following day, the minister and the missionary schoolteacher, Alexander MacKenzie, spent time catechizing and examining the people and MacDonald preached in the evening, again from the 2 Corinthians passage. At this point in the journal, as he would leave the next day, MacDonald assessed the trip up to that point. Having preached thirteen times in all he wrote:

What the result is, He alone knows who has said, "My word shall not return to me void;" but I can with truth say, that I enjoyed much comfort in the work, and that I hope my poor 'labors shall not be in vain in the Lord.' It becomes me to speak with modesty and caution as to any real effect produced. Yet a few, at least five or six, appear to be under serious impressions; while the general body seem to feel more than an ordinary concern about their eternal interests; and, I would fain hope, a greater degree of prepossession in favor of the gospel than has hitherto appeared among them.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Kennedy, *Apostle*, 123-125

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 125-126.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 126-128.

He finally wrote that he trusted the Gaelic teacher to carry on the spiritual provision in his absence, and with that left the island at 9 a.m. on Friday morning to the teary goodbyes of the locals.⁵⁸

Second Trip: May 1824

Between his first and second visits to St. Kilda, MacDonald and others with connections to the SSPCK quickly began to make plans for the collection of money toward the provision of church and minister on the island. Despite their benevolent interests, however, such plans would not reach fruition for several years.⁵⁹ In the meantime, MacDonald had meant to go back in 1823 but was unable to do so. When the sailing season of 1824 arrived, however, the SSPCK again appealed to MacDonald to return to St. Kilda. This time, he readily obliged. Travelling (and preaching) from Skye to Harris to Pabbay, another small island off the coast of Harris, he and the tacksman's party set out around 8:00 a.m. on 13 May.⁶⁰

That afternoon, MacDonald stepped ashore on St. Kilda for the second time. The locals greeted him warmly. Once on the island, he immediately resumed a busy schedule of preaching and catechizing, starting with a lesson on the night of his arrival. This time, though, rather than settling for an evening message per weekday, the minister of Ferintosh believed it would be prudent to have a lesson twice daily: in the mornings for “an exercise, somewhat resembling family worship, when I should read a chapter of Scripture and make some observations on it,” and in the evenings for a sermon from 6:00 to 8:00 p.m.⁶¹ The next morning, Saturday 14 May, he opened with some “observations”

⁵⁸ Ibid., 128-130.

⁵⁹ Robson, 286-289.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 289-291.

⁶¹ Kennedy, *Apostle*, 137-139.

on Romans 1, “in course containing a complete summary of Christian doctrine.” In the evening he was back in Romans 1, paying special attention to the ninth through twelfth verses “on Paul’s feelings with regard to the Christians at Rome, his ardent desire to see them, and the great end he had in view in wishing to have his desire fulfilled.” As in their responses from 1822, MacDonald’s audience appeared “much affected.”⁶²

The next day, his first Sabbath back on St. Kilda, MacDonald preached in the forenoon and afternoon “on the parable of the sower” in Luke 8:11-16, and in the evening on the warning to “take heed how ye hear” from Luke 8:18. At both services, he noted heightened affections, as well as a pleasing report that the children of the island brought Scriptures in the morning service.⁶³ Monday morning opened with an observation on Romans 2, followed by an evening sermon from Acts 16:14 “on the Lord’s opening the heart of Lydia.” Like the protagonist in the verse, MacDonald also noted that “the people appeared to be deeply concerned, and there seemed to be something like the opening of their hearts to receive the word.” The preaching was followed by two baptisms, at which point MacDonald made sure the St. Kildans understood that the sacrament was not a saving ordinance, as they seemed to have previously thought.⁶⁴

The next day’s journal entry, from Tuesday the 17th of May, again revealed the mind of MacDonald concerning the act of conversion. After a morning lesson from Romans 3 “on the important doctrine of justification,” an afternoon of observing the people at work, and a rare evening foray in the Old Testament with Zechariah 12:10 “on the promise of the outpouring of the Spirit and the effects that should follow,” he wrote passionately:

⁶² Ibid., 140.

⁶³ Ibid., 140-141.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 141.

Oh, let me not despair, though I should not see instances of sudden conversion. The seed below the ground may be making progress though I see it not. The process of vegetation in the seed which fell into the good ground was much slower than that of the seed which fell on the stony. Let me therefore sow in hope.⁶⁵

Clearly an allusion to his parabolic sermon from the Sunday past, MacDonald's journal here reveals a critical piece of the greater story that unfolded on St. Kilda during the ministries of both MacDonald and MacKenzie—the shift, albeit a gradual shift, from a culture of religious formality to one of vibrant expression.

Wednesday opened with an observation from Romans 4. Here again we see deeper into the theological framework of MacDonald as he laid out basic Calvinistic principles for the islanders, “calling their attention particularly to three important points relative to justification. 1. That God justifies the ungodly. 2. That the ungodly are justified by faith; and 3. That it is of faith, that it might be by grace.” The teacher, Alexander MacKenzie, agreed that these were key points that the islanders needed to hear. The St. Kildans themselves agreed that it was good to keep eternity at the fore of their minds, considering the dangers of their work among the cliffs and crags. In the evening, he turned to Matthew 11:28 “on our Savior's invitation to the laboring and heavy laden.”⁶⁶

Thursday morning began with a lesson from Romans 5, during which, MacDonald happily noted, he saw some of the locals marking places in their Bibles for later review. Regarding this, he noted: “In consequence of the Gaelic school established in the island, several of the young can read a little, and this is a great benefit to them in hearing public instruction.” For the rest of the day, MacDonald carried on among the

⁶⁵ Ibid., 141-142.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 142-143.

people during their workday as he often did during his first visit. Concerning the effects of the 1822 visit, he conceded that “if their feelings are not what they were, that their knowledge is much improved.” The evening sermon continued the verse and topic from the previous night.⁶⁷ On Friday, a morning lesson from Romans 6 on the relationship between justification and sanctification was followed up in the evening with a sermon from Isaiah 55:1. As the men were out in boats, there were mostly women at the night lesson.⁶⁸

The next two entries, from Saturday 21 May and Sunday the 22nd, are especially revealing. On Saturday morning, MacDonald lectured from Romans 7. However, the people seemed lost. He wrote: “I confess I seemed to myself to have forgotten that I was addressing not strong men but babes. I immediately checked myself and endeavored to bring my subject down to the level of their capabilities, when they listened with uncommon attention.” During the day, the St. Kildans were busy with MacLellan on rents, though the minister mentioned that they also took time to gift him with “a good fat wedder,”⁶⁹ an act of generosity apparently without precedent on the island. The evening lecture wrapped up his thoughts on Matthew 11:28. Following that service, he encouraged the people to pay more respect to the Sabbath. The islanders promised to do so, and they followed through. After a typical Sunday of three sermons, from Matthew, Zechariah, and John, MacDonald “observed that a more than ordinary degree of solemnity and sacred decorum marked their conduct during the whole day.”⁷⁰ Here again

⁶⁷ Ibid., 143-145.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 145.

⁶⁹ A sterile male sheep

⁷⁰ Ibid., 146-149.

we can begin to see the gradual shift toward the normalization of evangelical Christianity as the minister and people slowly began to appreciate one another in their own ways.

Monday morning began with observations on Romans 8:1-18. It was the evening service, however, that deserved more note. In his reflections on John 6:32, MacDonald's soteriology, or doctrine of salvation, emerged. He wrote:

I endeavored to represent that free exhibition of Christ in the Gospel to sinners, and the warrant thereby afforded them for accepting of him, a doctrine which seemed somehow to strike them with astonishment, and in which there seemed to be something new to them. For the sinner naturally riveted to a covenant of works ever conceives that the warrant to close with Christ must be found in himself and not in the gospel. ... I meet with this legal disposition in St. Kilda, as well as elsewhere.⁷¹

At this juncture it is clear that MacDonald thought works righteousness, that old enemy of Reformed theology, was a major stumbling block to the people of St. Kilda.

Tuesday through Friday was mostly uneventful. He continued as usual with an observation in the morning and sermon at night. Tuesday he wrote that the men were on Boreray gathering eggs and that upon the sermon "their understandings seem to be opening more and more to the truth." Wednesday he worked out of Romans 8 and 9 on the sovereignty and grace of God, while also taking time for himself to read an account of the English divine Matthew Henry. Thursday it was Romans 10 and Genesis 19, and he saw that "several among them were not a little affected." On Friday morning, Romans 12 "afforded me an opportunity of stating the connection between faith and practice," and he preached in the evening "on the new birth" from John 3:1-10.⁷²

The weekend started with a morning observation on Romans 12 on Saturday. Following this, MacDonald and MacLellan spent part of the day assessing "the school

⁷¹ Ibid., 149-150.

⁷² Ibid., 150-154.

here established by the Society for the support of Gaelic Schools,” where MacDonald noted an increase in literacy and the use of the Gaelic Psalms, “a species of composition of which, from their musical turn, they seem to be very fond.” After testing the population on religious doctrine and hearing some songs, the minister and tacksman distributed Bibles, testaments, and Gaelic catechisms. The evening message focused again on Romans 13. The next morning, the Sabbath activities started with preaching from Hebrews 9 on the typological character of Old Testament objects. In the evening, MacDonald worked from 2 Corinthians 3:18 “on beholding the glory of the Lord in the mirror of the gospel.” In response to the evening service, the St. Kildans were again affected emotionally with “not a few in tears.” In yet another sign that the famous itinerant was beginning to impact the lives of the locals, he joyfully recounted that families returned to their houses at the end of the Sabbath evening services and continued the night in family devotions, Scripture reading, and spiritual song.⁷³

Monday through Wednesday he left shorter entries, as the minister began to prepare for his departure. After an unspecified lesson Monday morning and an evening service back in 2 Corinthians 3:18, he mentioned to the St. Kildans that the SSPCK intended to build a new church and send a permanent minister. Tuesdays messages were from Romans 14 and 15 and elicited yet another emotional response with the impending disembarkation of MacDonald. Then, on the morning of 1 June, he lectured on Ephesians 5, prepared to leave, met briefly to pray with the people in the barn, and departed with the tacksman’s party at 8:00 p.m.⁷⁴

⁷³ Ibid., 154-156.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 156-158.

Third Trip (July 1827), Church Construction, and Clerical Provision

MacDonald's reports from the second visit continued to spur on the efforts of the SSPCK toward the provision of a church and permanent clergyman. Three years after his second visit, MacDonald made another brief trip to St. Kilda and arrived on 8 July. Again he preached, catechized, baptized, and performed a wedding. On this trip he also noted an increase in family worship, literacy, and weekly communal worship among a number of the island's men. In an act of anticipation, he laid the foundation stone for the new church on the island. On the evening of the 15th, MacDonald held a final service and returned east with the tacksman and his crew.⁷⁵

With the sufficient funds raised and the details arranged, the new church and manse were completed by June of 1828. The task now shifted to ministerial provision. By 1829 the SSPCK leadership had still not found a nominee for the role of "missionary and catechist" on St. Kilda. As Robson wryly notes, despite the Romantic and idyllic aura surrounding St. Kilda, "the appeal did not extend to potential ministers and teachers who would have to go and live there."⁷⁶ A certain Peter Davidson was put forward in the early months of 1829, but backed out in December of the same year. By 1830 another candidate had caught the eye of Dr. Daniel Dewar, but he too reneged. A few months later with no potentials in sight, MacDonald planned to go out again himself. However, Dr. Dewar's candidate, Neil MacKenzie, changed his mind. As time was of the essence, MacKenzie was rushed through the ordination process and scheduled to join MacDonald on his fourth trip to the island that summer.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Robson, *St. Kilda*, 293-306. I rely on Robson for much of the third trip, as I found that the Kennedy collection did not address it in any length.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 311.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 311-313.

Fourth Trip: July 1830

Kennedy noted before providing the journal entries of MacDonald's final visit to the island that: "He preached all over Scotland, making collections wherever he went, till at last the required amount was gathered. ... In 1830 he accompanied the minister and his family to St. Kilda to introduce him to his future flock. The feelings which stirred his heart on this occasion are described in the following."⁷⁸ At 7:00 p.m. on the last day of June, the party set out from Pabbay consisting of "Mr. MacKenzie, Mrs. MacKenzie and child, with Mrs. MacKenzie's mother and sister, Mr. Bethune, tutor in Mr. M'Lellan's family, and Major J. M'Neil, who also accompanied us on the trip, and whose society will be no small addition to our comfort."⁷⁹ After arriving at 4:00 a.m. on 1 July and being enthusiastically greeted by the islanders, they held a quick morning meeting in the new church with a passage, a psalm, and a prayer. The people quickly warmed to MacKenzie and expressed joy at his arrival. The next day, MacDonald preached one 5 o'clock sermon on Psalm 37:4 after the people spent the day busily conducting business with Mr. Bethune. Concerning the islanders, MacDonald noted: "There certainly appears to be an improvement, in point of knowledge, with them. But there seems to be more of the love of the truth among them, and more openness of heart to receive it, than I had discovered on former occasions."⁸⁰

The next four days' entries were shorter. On Saturday MacDonald preached one sermon in the late afternoon from 1 John 1:7 that caused some to respond as if affected. The next day, however, was apparently quite special for MacDonald. It was "the day on

⁷⁸ Kennedy, *Apostle*, 172-173.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 177-178.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 178-181.

which Mr. MacKenzie was introduced to the people, and commenced his services among them,” and for MacDonald, it “was to me the most important and delightful day I ever spent at St. Kilda.” MacKenzie having preached all of the Sabbath sermons, MacDonald resumed on Monday afternoon with a lesson from Psalm 84:11 on grace. Noting the impressions that this particular message inspired, he said, “There are blossoms at least. The Lord grant that the ripe fruit may yet be seen!” Tuesday evening’s message was from Ephesians 5 and accompanied a marriage service for a St. Kildan couple.⁸¹

From that point on, MacDonald’s final trip began to slowly wind down. On the evening of Wednesday 7 July, he preached from 1 Thessalonians 5, assuming that it would be one of his ultimate messages. Emotion overtook the new church: “Towards the close, the poor people began to be much affected, and to weep aloud. My own feelings were overcome. I felt it difficult to speak. Indeed, the idea of a separation was most painful alike to speaker and to hearers.” However, a spat of stormy weather hindered the departure of the itinerant and his party. He stayed and, as he was prone to do, preached as he waited. Finally, by Monday he expected to leave at any time and gave an impassioned final message in the evening on John 12:22. He said:

Conceiving this to be my last service among them, my object was to lead their views to the cross, and, if possible, to fix them there; nay, to shut them up to this glorious object. This, I told them, was the great end of my ministrations among them, and I trusted would be his who was now set over them in the Lord. I besought them, therefore, to be anxious and make this use of his labors, and not to rest till they perceived and felt the power of attraction there is in the cross of Christ.⁸²

The departure was yet again an emotional one. MacDonald closed: “I prayed with them on the shore, and so we parted.”⁸³

⁸¹ Ibid., 181-183.

⁸² Ibid., 183-187.

⁸³ Ibid.

Assessment

John MacDonald of Ferintosh impacted the faith, culture, and overall worldview of the St. Kildans.⁸⁴ He was clearly successful in introducing the basics of evangelicalism to a religious atmosphere otherwise void of that type of popular Protestant piety. Many distinctively evangelical elements began to define the church on the island. In light of the fact that evangelicalism as a movement encouraged a more heart-felt expression of religious experience, MacDonald recorded several accounts of his messages leading to “affections,” “impressions,” “meltings,” etc. As for the biblical emphasis of evangelicalism, his times with the people were always marked by exposition of biblical texts and the application of the lessons seen within them. With other evangelicals and evangelical organizations in the same era, MacDonald saw to the increased provision of basic education.⁸⁵ In relation to theology, MacDonald continually pressed a “theology of the cross” in his preaching that made explicit the evangelical emphasis on the substitutionary death of Jesus. Finally, he mirrored other Highland evangelicals by encouraging the St. Kildans to pay more careful and regulated respect to the Sabbath day. By the time he brought MacKenzie out in 1830, it would seem that the islanders were well acquainted with the general thought and practice of evangelicalism. MacKenzie, as we shall soon observe, did not agree with this assessment. Be that as it may, John MacDonald of Ferintosh undeniably began the process of a religious and cultural

⁸⁴ Robson supports this idea that MacDonald’s impact was multifaceted. He notes: “With MacDonald’s visits ... it became clear that even more than before St. Kilda was subject to outside influences not just on religious attitudes and customs but on the cultural heritage and on daily circumstances.” *St. Kilda*, 268.

⁸⁵ The fullest assessment on evangelicals and education in the nineteenth century is David A. Currie, “The Growth of Evangelicalism in the Church of Scotland, 1793-1843” (PhD diss., University of St. Andrews, Scotland, 1990).

paradigm shift toward bringing St. Kilda into “the fold of the wider family of faith in the Highlands and Islands.”⁸⁶

⁸⁶ Meek, “Reexamination,” 103.

CHAPTER TWO

NEIL MACKENZIE, TRANSFORMATION, AND REVIVAL

Under the name “Neil MacKenzie” with relation to St. Kilda, *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticanæ*, the veritable who’s who of all pre-Disruption Church of Scotland clergy, merely reads: “ord. in 1830; trans. to Duror in 1844.”¹ The intervening years were pivotal, both for the minister and his family and for the people of St. Kilda. At first there was disappointment. In the end, there was revival. In between, there was nothing less than a cultural transformation.²

Neil MacKenzie (ca. 1795-1879)

Much of what we know of Neil MacKenzie and his time on the island comes from the published account, *Episode in the Life of the Rev. Neil MacKenzie at St. Kilda from 1829 to 1843*, gathered by his son, James Bannatyne (J.B.) MacKenzie, and published in 1911.³ In the front matter, the son provides the basics of his father’s life and ministry.

¹ Hew Scott, *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticanæ* vol. VII (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1928), 194.

² The study of MacKenzie and his role on the island draw most heavily from four primary sources: 1) E.G. McQueen and K. McQueen, eds., *St. Kilda Heritage: Autobiography of Callum MacCuithinn (Malcolm MacQueen)* (Edinburgh: The Scottish Genealogy Society, 1995); 2) J.B. MacKenzie, ed., *Episode in the Life of the Rev. Neil MacKenzie at St. Kilda from 1829 to 1843* (Privately Printed, 1911); 3) James Wilson, *A Voyage Round The Coasts of Scotland and the Isles*, vol. II (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1842), accessed March 9, 2014, http://books.google.com/books?id=acHAAAAQAAJ&pg=PR2&lpg=PR2&dq=james+wilson+a+voyage+around+the+coast+and+isles+vol+2&source=bl&ots=xTbnJqAEhZ&sig=A42LLvZ4J2_8T_6UYfZfJo5Pdc&hl=en&sa=X&ei=2OYcU9KrDeSU1AHTjoCACg&ved=0CDUQ6AEwAg#v=onepage&q=james%20wilson%20a%20voyage%20around%20the%20coast%20and%20isles%20vol%202&f=false; 4) Lachlan MacLean, “Sketches of the Island Saint Kilda; comprising of Manners and Maxims of the Natives, Ancient and Modern; together with the Ornithology, Geology, Etymology, Domology, and other curiosities of that unique island; taken down, for the greater part, from the oral narration of the Rev. N. M’Kenzie, at present, and for the last eight years, Clergyman of the Island,” *The Calcutta Christian Observer*, January to December, 1839, accessed March 9, 2014, http://books.google.com/books?id=qrUOAAAAIAAJ&dq=lachlan%20maclean%20st%20kilda%20calcutta%201838&source=gbs_book_other_versions.

³ J.B. MacKenzie, ed., *Episode in the Life of the Rev. Neil MacKenzie at St. Kilda*. According to J.B. MacKenzie, the data is Rev. MacKenzie’s own, “from some of whose notes this narrative has been compiled.” The son went on, “His notes were written at various times, on all sorts of scraps of paper, and all that has been done by the Editor has been to piece them together, as far as possible, in the form of a

Neil MacKenzie was born in Glen Sannox, on the Isle of Arran, to a family originally from Kintail, Ross-shire. His father was a tenant “of the mill and farm of Glen Sannox,” and, according to J.B., a highly religious man who provided his family with a robust diet of Gaelic evangelical devotions. Somewhere in the middle of his university education, Neil MacKenzie witnessed the drowning of a friend and barely escaped the same fate. This highly charged experience caused a revitalization of his own Christian faith, whereupon he left the life of learning “to become a preacher of the Gospel and to go somewhere as a missionary.”⁴ He hoped to go to Canada to pursue these goals, but the place for which he applied had been filled. As he was willing “to go to any place for which no one else could be got,” he agreed in 1830 with Dr. Dewar, the SSPCK, and MacDonald that he should prepare and go at once to shepherd the outlying Hebridean church.⁵

Of his character and role on St. Kilda, his son recalled that his father acted as “a sort of Governor of the island, presiding at their weekly meetings for settling the work they were to engage in during the week and arranging all kinds of petty disputes.” He also mentioned the religious temperament of his father: “Though very strictly orthodox in his religious practices and beliefs, he was by no means a fanatic or ascetic.” MacKenzie’s wife, Elizabeth Crawford MacKenzie, “greatly assisted” her husband in his labors by teaching the St. Kildan women new ways of conducting domestic chores, “cooking and

more or less continuous narrative. It will easily be seen that they were never intended for publication, and that they were written by one who did his thinking in the Gaelic’ (3). Sadly, the son later went on to note that upon his father’s leaving the island, the majority of his records were lost (4).

⁴ With regard to the near-death experience jolting to life a dormant faith, MacKenzie joins other prominent evangelicals, such as Thomas Chalmers. Regarding his leaving school, James Wilson’s account from 1841 corroborates this in noting that MacKenzie was “probably not a person of finished education” (41-42).

⁵ MacKenzie, *Episode*, 3.

other sanitary matters,” “and of the virtues of soap and starch.”⁶ She also raised several children on the island, whom James Wilson described as “fine rosy-cheeked.”⁷

The other first-hand accounts provide further detail. Wilson, who visited the island in 1841, made several descriptive comments regarding the minister. He wrote that he was “a sincere, simple, kind-hearted, pious man, as we firmly believe from the impression which our subsequent intercourse with him produced.”⁸ Regarding his roles on the island, Wilson noted that he bore the responsibility for the teaching and preaching, as well as numerous other unrelated duties, and was well-loved by the people for it.⁹ During this same tour, Wilson invited the minister out to his boat for a visit, during which he discovered that MacKenzie was “well-informed and intelligent.” The clergyman supplied the visitors with “a great deal of information regarding the temporal as well as spiritual condition of the people, their habits of life, and customary occupation.”¹⁰ Lachlan MacLean’s earlier visit confirmed the same observation that the minister’s care superseded his spiritual responsibilities, noting: “He has labored there ... paying assiduous attention not only to the religious, but to the moral and physical wants of the people.”¹¹ Finally, and in perhaps the truest of the firsthand accounts, Callum MacQueen recounted that MacKenzie was “a good man and faithful preacher.”¹² In 1830, however, Neil MacKenzie had more pressing matters to attend to than the cultivation of his good character. Upon his arrival, he quickly realized that MacDonald of Ferintosh had overestimated the religious state of the islanders. There was work to be done.

⁶ Ibid., 4.

⁷ Wilson, *Voyage*, 19, 10.

⁸ Wilson, *Voyage*, 9-10.

⁹ Ibid., 12.

¹⁰ Ibid., 41-42.

¹¹ MacLean, “Sketches,” 331-332.

¹² McQueen and McQueen, *St Kilda Heritage*, 15.

Disappointment

When MacKenzie arrived in 1830, he was dismayed with both the moral state of the St. Kildans and the religious improvements MacDonald claimed to have made. Morally, he found the islanders wanting in virtue and lacking in “every moral obligation,” making note of their petty theft from the island’s proprietor. Regarding their communitarian social ethics, he described how they shared the guilt of shorting the proprietor and were incredibly wary to guard themselves as a community from outsiders who might give information of their activities to the MacLeods or their agents. MacKenzie reported that they even went to murderous extremes by pushing a Skyeman off a cliff and strangling a woman who was the steward’s servant. Beyond its violent expression, he further bemoans their insistence on total egalitarianism. He wrote:

Equal in their hopes and fears and habits, they in everything insisted upon an equality which had a deadening influence and effectually hindered any real progress. If anyone attempted to better himself he was set upon from all sides and persecuted by everyone. There must be no departure from what their fathers had done, unless, indeed, it were possible to do less. No one must be allowed to make himself much more comfortable than others.¹³

Other accounts also cite the ethos of equality as a hindrance to “improvement.” Wilson wrote: “The St. Kildan community may in many respects be regarded as a small republic, in which the individual members share most of their worldly goods in common.” He went on: “Indeed, a peculiar jealousy is alleged to exist on the head, no man being encouraged to go in advance of those about him in any thing.”¹⁴

As for their spiritual state, MacKenzie wrote:

When I went to the island in 1830 I was accompanied by my friend Dr. M'Donald, who during his short stay on the island preached several eloquent and powerful sermons, to which they apparently paid great attention; but I soon found

¹³ MacKenzie, *Episode*, 30.

¹⁴ Wilson, *Voyage*, 24-25.

that they were only charmed by his eloquence and energy, and had not knowledge enough to follow or understand his arguments. I found that it was the same with my own sermons – that they were too ignorant of the leading truths of Christianity and the practical effects which, under the influence of the Spirit of God, they were calculated to produce, to profit as I would like by my discourses.¹⁵

MacKenzie's assessment of the island's spiritual condition in 1830 begs a serious question: How could the St. Kildan church, in light of MacDonald's seemingly effective preaching ministry over the course of the 1820s, have ended up lifeless and empty? On one hand, the four visits of the itinerating minister indeed succeeded in introducing the people of St. Kilda to the biblical, experiential, and theological world of evangelicalism.¹⁶ This point must be stressed. Yet, this introduction was insufficiently transformational. What the St. Kildan church needed in order to change was a minister who stayed for years, not weeks. As MacKenzie himself noted, "To change the habits of such a people must be the work either of time or grace."¹⁷ What, then, could be done by MacKenzie to reach his goals of increased morality and "practical effects"? The answer was simple. He needed to stay.

Transformation

As MacKenzie continued his ministry on the island throughout the 1830s and into the next decade, the church and culture of St. Kilda were transformed due to the interactions and exchanges between St. Kilda's Gaelic culture and MacKenzie's evangelicalism, the all-encompassing improvements made by MacKenzie and the islanders, and a gradual rise of local self-determination. The transformation occurred in large part due to a two-way cultural transference. The dominant narrative of those such as

¹⁵ Ibid., 31-32.

¹⁶ The language of introduction regarding MacDonald comes from Andrew Fleming, *St Kilda and the Wider World: Tales of an Iconic Island* (Bollington, Cheshire: Windgather Press Ltd, 2005), 23.

¹⁷ Neil MacKenzie, journal extracts 1832-1833, quoted in Robson, *St Kilda*, 334.

Steel and MacLean, and even Robson to a certain degree, paints a bleak picture of evangelicalism arriving on the island with MacDonald and subsequently wiping out the native culture through MacKenzie to replace it with a “strict” or “Puritanical” form of Christian culture. If we take into serious account the world of ideas, it becomes clearer that the “clash of cultures” on St. Kilda in the period at hand involved a certain degree of transculturation.¹⁸

In the first case, there was indeed a cultural divide separating the islanders from the Evangelicals. However, rather than being a “modern” vs. “uncivilized” split as a nineteenth-century tourist might have seen it, it was instead a very real ideological divide between the pre-modern and modern in the philosophical sense of the words. The islanders, as the previous survey of the island showed, held a highly embodied and supernaturalistic cosmology with little to no divide between nature and spirit. The Church, in a formal sense, influenced their worldview, but their day-to-day lives were influenced more by the pre-Christian and folk traditions of the island and other Hebrides from which their ancestors came.

MacDonald and MacKenzie, on the other hand, brought with them to the island a more modern worldview. Both trained for a time in the Scottish universities and would have been exposed to the dualistic world of the Enlightenment, which preached the twin gospels of reason and empiricism, while casting doubt on the supernatural. Scottish evangelicalism itself was colored by the “Spirit of the Age.” In one scholar’s view,

¹⁸ The clash of cultures paradigm, focus on the world of ideas, and monist/dualist discussion that follow are used in David Bebbington’s study of the Ferryden revival in Forfarshire in the later part of the century and have been helpful in my understanding of the St Kilda experience(s). See David Bebbington, *Victorian Religious Revivals: Culture and Piety in Local and Global Contexts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 159-192. Transculturation, as a concept, stresses the two-way channels that develop as two or more cultures interact over time. I owe thanks to Dr. Kathryn Long of Wheaton College (IL) for introducing me to this concept during my undergraduate History degree.

“Evangelical theology ... was simple, rational and practical. It shared the hallmarks of the Enlightenment.”¹⁹ Scottish evangelicals were also influenced by the Locke-tinged theology of Jonathan Edwards as they “learned ... to place confidence in knowledge derived from sense experience.”²⁰ The evangelicals and the islanders, in sum, understood reality along different lines.

How did the transformation from two worldviews to one worldview take place? And which worldview predominated? Through the process of transculturation, a distinctly St. Kildan form of evangelicalism emerged. There was no winner and loser, but a dialogical and gradual cosmological shift.²¹ A good example of this process comes via MacKenzie’s relation of his discussion with the islanders on a specific folk tradition.²² At one point during his tenure, he happened upon a group of St. Kildans discussing second sight. He heard them out and:

With an eye to the same thing, explained that part of the answer to the question, “What is God?” “God is a spirit.” I told them in the simplest manner what is a spirit, and what is not; that there are three spiritual existences, namely, the Supreme Spirit God, angels, and the souls of men; that the Supreme Being differed from all other spirits, in being infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in all his attributes; whereas angels and souls of men are but limited, changeable, and created beings.²³

In this quote, upon hearing their views on spirits, MacKenzie attempted to outline the basics of orthodox Christian belief on the subject in order to provide a point of contact

¹⁹ D.W. Bebbington, “Evangelicalism in Modern Scotland,” in *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 9 (Spring 1991): 6.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ On this point I disagree with Robson, who said: “MacKenzie no doubt thought that he was fitting a Christian and superseding version of the spiritual world into a traditional island framework for better understanding, but it may easily be imagined that the islanders, a little confused, found it more understandable and quite consistent to remain loyal to their second sight...” *St Kilda*, 332.

²² As Robson here points out, MacKenzie’s language and attitude toward the local customs and worldview were admittedly hostile and self-superior (i.e., calling them “ridiculous and fanciful,” “folly and absurdity,” and “reveries”). My intention is not to whitewash the elements of cultural imperialism that did, in fact, appear from time to time in MacDonald and MacKenzie, but rather to provide a check to the idea of cultural “invasion.” Cf. MacKenzie in Robson, *St Kilda*, 331 and Robson, *St Kilda*, 303.

²³ Neil MacKenzie, journal extracts 1832-1833, quoted in Robson, *St Kilda*, 331.

with which to further explain the evangelical message. Through the continuation of such conversations, the minister was able to draw the people from a pre-Christian belief to an evangelical faith that also took seriously the existence of a spiritual realm.²⁴

In a second sense, cultural transformation also occurred between church and people as it related to St. Kildan popular culture. To be sure, evangelicalism did impose an alien code of ethics in certain respects, such as its negative attitude toward dancing and “music of a worldly character.”²⁵ However, the islanders’ Gaelic culture was appreciated and recorded, as well as expanded and ultimately preserved, through the indigenization of evangelicalism on St. Kilda.²⁶ The most vivid examples of this are the local enthusiasm for Gaelic psalm singing and the production of original Gaelic religious poetry.²⁷ Regarding the Gaelic psalm singing, Wilson recorded in 1841:

The singing of psalms and hymns is even a favorite spiritual recreation of the people, and is resorted to frequently and voluntarily in their own houses, independent of the more formal meetings which may be occasionally called for the express purpose. The spiritual songs may even be said to be of ordinary use almost as the *popular poetry* of the day.²⁸

As the Chapter Four will discuss, this was also not a phenomena unique to St. Kilda.

Evangelicals throughout the Highlands and Islands of Scotland became known especially for their cherished Gaelic hymns.

²⁴ For more on this, see Elizabeth Ritchie, “The faith of the crofters: Skye and South Uist, 1793-1843,” (PhD diss., University of Guelph, 2010), 138, 145.

²⁵ Wilson, *Voyage*, 23-24. Also see note 35. Wilson noted on his 1841 visit that “Dancing is also now regarded by them as a frivolous amusement, and has ceased to be practiced even during their more joyous festivals.”

²⁶ Donald Meek, “‘Eileanaich Cian a’ Chuain’ / ‘The Remote Islanders of the Sea’? Towards a Reexamination of the Role of Church and Faith in St Kilda,” in *Rewriting St Kilda: New Views on Old Ideas*, ed. Bob Chambers (Isle of Lewis: The Islands Book Trust, 2010), 108-109.

²⁷ David Paton provides a wonderful analysis on evangelicalism and Gaelic poetry and singing in *The Clergy and the Clearances* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 2006), 114-120.

²⁸ Wilson, *Voyage*, 23-24 (emphasis his).

As for native cultural production, MacKenzie later noted that, “Before I left the island I got some of them to write out for me much of their poetry and traditions, but, unfortunately, almost all of these, and several other collections which I had made of things which had interested me, were lost on the way from St. Kilda to Duror, and could never be recovered.”²⁹ As another indication that the minister encouraged cultural dynamism rather than eradication, J.B. MacKenzie remembers that his father “encouraged the people during the long winter nights to cultivate the art of reciting their ancient stories and of singing their pathetic Gaelic songs.”³⁰

Despite the accident between St. Kilda and Duror, a number of the St. Kildan poems survived and were published in the early part of the last century. Mary Harman provides two of them in their translated form. In the first sample, Neil Ferguson wrote of the 1841-1842 revival:

Alas, oh Lord, won't you help me
From my thoughts to an awakening
Before the time comes when I die
When there won't be time for repentance³¹

The second sample, by Finlay MacQueen, “describes the nativity and the spread of the gospel to foreign lands and to St. Kilda”:

God of the moon, God of the sun,
God of the globe, God of the stars,
God of the waters, the land, and the skies,
Who ordained to us the King of promise.

It was Mary fair who went upon her knee,
It was the King of life who went upon her lap,
Darkness and tears were set behind,
And the star of guidance went up early.

²⁹ MacKenzie, *Episode*, 32.

³⁰ MacKenzie, *Episode*, 3. “Pathetic” here is not derogatory, but rather descriptive, as the Gaelic bardic and poetic tradition emphasized elegy as a form.

³¹ Harman, *Hirte*, 241.

Illumined the land, illumined the world,
 Illumined doldrum and current,
 Grief was laid and joy was raised,
 Music was set up with harp and pedal-harp.³²

Both poems are rife with indications that by the time of their writing in the early 1840s, the process of worldview transformation introduced by MacDonald and furthered by MacKenzie was nearing completion. In Ferguson's revival poem, the line "From my thoughts to an awakening" indicates that the islander had begun to adopt the evangelical preaching emphasis of the gospel's impact on the heart and affections as the ultimate source of conversion. The poem by Finlay MacQueen is equally telling, almost as if certain aspects of the transculturation process take verse form. The first stanza is especially unique. The first three lines extol the God of nature – a god with which the St. Kildans could have associated prior to the introduction of evangelicalism. The final line, though, speaks of Jesus Christ as the "ordained ... King of promise." Taken together, the stanza presents the new worldview – neither wholly St. Kildan traditionalism nor alien evangelicalism, but rather St. Kildan evangelicalism.

Along with the ideological and popular cultural elements, the transformation of St. Kildan culture was also effected through a multifaceted attempt to improve the lives of the islanders. Ideas of social and agricultural improvement were tied up in the Enlightenment ideals of progress and societal betterment through scientific and modern means.³³ However, until the 1820s, very little attention was given toward the improvement of St. Kilda. With the arrival of MacDonald of Ferintosh in 1822, the SSPCK and others began to take increased interest in the island's ecclesiastical provision.

³² Ibid., 241-242.

³³ Michael Lynch, *Scotland: A New History* (London: Pimlico, 1992), 344-345, 363, 370.

This not only resulted in the arrival of MacKenzie in 1830, but also, as the section on MacDonald noted, with the erection of a new church and manse. James Wilson described the new buildings as a “very respectable-looking slated house ... with a little porch, and a longer and larger, but not much higher building (also slated) behind it, and separated by a narrow back court.”³⁴ It was this church and manse where MacKenzie spent much of his time between 1830 and 1843.

Under MacKenzie’s guidance, the island as a whole underwent incredible changes—religiously and educationally, of course, but also agriculturally and domestically. As per his disappointment with MacDonald’s spiritual impact, MacKenzie quickly got down to the business of building the foundations of Christian thought and practice in the heads and hearts of the islanders. He wrote: “I at once began Wednesday evening meetings, where I explained to them the Shorter Catechism, clause by clause, and almost word by word. Before they could properly understand and profit by preaching they had to be taught step by step, and in the simplest way possible, the leading facts and truths of Christianity.”³⁵ Thus MacKenzie met the people at the level of their own ability, rather than continuing to preach above them, which seemed to have hamstrung MacDonald’s efforts. He went on:

To test their progress we at other times had meetings for catechizing. In this way several evenings in the week were occupied. ... I encouraged them to ask me questions, and these at times led to very profitable discussions. I soon had the great pleasure in finding that they were advancing in knowledge, and taking more interest in the subject.³⁶

³⁴ Wilson, *Voyage*, 10.

³⁵ MacKenzie, *Episode*, 32.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

Again we can see a dialogical, rather than dictatorial, relationship at work between the minister and the St. Kildans, as they engaged with MacKenzie's teaching in the process of appropriating evangelicalism into their own worldview frameworks.

Callum MacQueen also noted the religious diet of the islanders during MacKenzie's ministry. He remembered that "services on Sundays were 7 a.m. Gaelic, 11 a.m. Gaelic and before separating, English service," followed by "afternoon Gaelic." He also noted that "at one time Bible class at 2 p.m. for 2 ½ hours, many married men and women," plus "a meeting every Thursday to explain the Shorter Catechism," "service in the church" on Wednesdays nights, a communicant meeting on Thursday evenings, and "Friday evenings a preparatory class."³⁷

Despite the increase in Christian learning, however, MacKenzie remained unsatisfied. After all, he was preaching, as was characteristic of his evangelical foundations, toward the peoples' hearts. Though he improved their knowledge via catechesis and discussion, he "could not see for several years any real spiritual fruit."³⁸ It would take time, he was realizing, for the islanders to make his piety their own.

There was also an improvement in the islanders' education and literacy. MacKenzie wrote that he started a Sabbath School for the locals to further their Christian education. This was unsuccessful due to a high rate of illiteracy among St. Kildans. To remedy the situation, the minister "started a day school, and, as all attended, I was able to teach them not only to read but also write and do arithmetic, so that before long I left the island the were almost all good scholars. They could read fluently and write with

³⁷ McQueen and McQueen, *St. Kilda Heritage*, 15.

³⁸ MacKenzie, *Episode*, 32-33.

accuracy and intelligence.”³⁹ By raising the islanders’ beyond illiteracy to fluency, MacKenzie further transformed the culture of St. Kilda.

What distinguished Neil MacKenzie from any previous minister, however, was not his attempt to evangelize and educate the people of St. Kilda. He was much more successful than they in that respect, but that was not what made him stand out. Neil MacKenzie also labored, alongside the locals, to improve the overall material wellbeing on the island. In the broadest sense, what MacKenzie accomplished agriculturally and domestically was the transition of the land from a centralized township with common land re-appropriated on three bases to a new system of crofting whereby each family lived separately in houses along a new village “street” with individual plots of arable land and shared pastures.⁴⁰ This process was not uniquely St. Kildan or original to MacKenzie, but took place throughout the Highlands and Islands.⁴¹ Callum MacQueen noted that each man farmed 8 or 10 acres, indicating that this system had been initiated by the time he was a boy in the 1830s.⁴² Along with the land redistribution, MacKenzie also introduced an “English spade” to replace a less productive local tool and improved the land drainage.⁴³ Finally, J.B. MacKenzie mentioned that his father also built a sea wall to protect the crops from ocean spray and dug new wells.⁴⁴

As for the domestic improvements, Wilson’s account from 1841 provides an excellent, if somewhat stuffy, summary. He noted that:

Some years ago an accomplished gentleman of fortune, Sir Thomas Dyke Ackland, visited St. Kilda in his yacht, and being much interested in the natives,

³⁹ Ibid., 32.

⁴⁰ Mary Harman, *An Isle Called Hirte: History and Culture of the St Kildans to 1930* (MacLean Press: Isle of Skye, 1997), 198-201.

⁴¹ T.M. Devine, *The Scottish Nation: 1700-2007*, 2nd ed. (London: Penguin Books, 2007), 189-190.

⁴² McQueen and McQueen, *St. Kilda Heritage*, 10.

⁴³ Wilson, *Voyage*, 22.

⁴⁴ MacKenzie, *Episode*, 3.

and distressed by an inspection of their incommodious, and as he thought highly unhealthy dwellings, he left a premium of twenty guineas with the minister, and to be given to the first person or persons who should demolish their old house and erect a new one on a more popular and convenient plan.⁴⁵

MacQueen's memory corroborates Wilson's observations. He wrote, "At the time of my father's marriage the houses were grouped together but my when I was 8 or 10 surveyors cut the place up in lots and each man had to go onto his own new low and new houses were put up."⁴⁶ As Callum was born in 1828, this would place the building process between 1836 and 1838. After the houses were built, MacKenzie hoped that he might find a way to provide the islanders with a number of more modern furnishings. Lachlan MacLean noted that the minister went to Glasgow on "an errand of mercy" around that time to acquire "beds, chairs, stools, mills, nay, even glass windows!"⁴⁷

In sum, St. Kilda was rejuvenated through the efforts of Neil MacKenzie to holistically improve the lives of the islanders. However, it was not merely a case of an improving landlord forcing the people to change their ways of life. In all of his efforts – religiously, educationally, agriculturally, and domestically – the Rev. Neil MacKenzie worked alongside the people. His son remembered that "all the time they were at work he remained with them, doing as hard work as any."⁴⁸ MacKenzie knew that in order to reach the people of St. Kilda with his evangelical message, he needed to work incarnationally within the community. His tired eyes, sweaty brow, and calloused hands would tell of his care for the people as much as his words.

⁴⁵ Wilson, *Voyage*, 32-33.

⁴⁶ McQueen and McQueen, *St. Kilda Heritage*, 6.

⁴⁷ MacLean, *Sketches*, 331-332.

⁴⁸ MacKenzie, *Episode*, 3.

The rise of insular self-determination was the third and final manner in which the culture of St. Kilda was transformed during the ministry of Neil MacKenzie.⁴⁹ This process occurred primarily in the ecclesial context, yet enabled the locals through the means of the church to assert a greater degree of responsibility and independence. It was through this process, as well, that the St. Kildans began to further appropriate the piety of evangelicalism into their own lives. As noted in Chapter Four's survey of Highland evangelicalism, the sacrament of communion, or the Lord's Supper, was reserved for those within a given church community who exhibited in their faith and daily lives the markings of being "truly converted." To be a communicant in a Highland church, then, was to be among the elect in both a socially powerful and personally assuring way. So it was, too, in the case of St. Kilda. By 1838, MacKenzie was satisfied with the spiritual maturity of enough St. Kildans to celebrate a communion.⁵⁰ As a result, the island received some visitors.

MacKenzie remembered: "When this intention was made known to the Society for Propagating Christian Knowledge, the late venerable Dr. Dickson, its controller, along with Dr. M'Leod of Glasgow, came to the island in order to personally satisfy themselves of their fitness."⁵¹ Along with the goal of assuring that St. Kilda's parishioners were ready for the sacrament, MacKenzie was hopeful that the two SSPCK envoys would satisfy another of his desires: "to constitute a Kirk Session."⁵² Upon arrival, Dickson and MacLeod "examined minutely those who were intending to partake

⁴⁹ This theme has also been highlighted by Bill Lawson, Bill Lawson, "Hiort in Pre-1930 Writings – An Overview," in *Rewriting St Kilda: New Views on Old Ideas*, ed. Bob Chambers (South Lochs, Isle of Lewis: The Islands Book Trust, 2011), 21.

⁵⁰ MacKenzie, *Episode*, 33.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

of the holy ordinance, and found their knowledge and state of mind such as to justify them in putting into their hands the sacred symbols of the love of their crucified Savior.” In total, “the number who at this time were admitted into the Church was fifteen or sixteen.”⁵³ When Wilson arrived three years later, he would report that “There are about twenty communicants, and about twenty more who are under serious instruction and preparation with a view to the partaking of that sacred ordinance.” He further noted, “Several of the older men among the natives are very fluent in prayer, and never fail to conduct a kind of public worship during the few occasions in which the minister is absent.”⁵⁴

Two specific items from the testimonies of MacKenzie and Wilson speak most directly to the way in which the people of St. Kilda came to assert a greater degree of communal identity and ambition. First, MacKenzie noted that he hoped to establish a kirk session on the island. Within Presbyterianism, the primary “building blocks” of church polity are church or kirk sessions. A session is essentially a board of several elders who, along with the ordained parish minister, carry out or see to the carrying out of all that the local church does. What MacKenzie was attempting to do, then, was something that no previous St. Kilda clergyman had ever done: give the islanders, through the eldership, a determinative role in the faith and culture of the island. Hence, MacKenzie further transformed the church into an institution through which local issues received local attention from local leaders.

The second way in which the evidence describes this rise in self-determination is fascinating and distinct to the evangelical traditions of the Highland and Islands. Here,

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Wilson, *Voyage*, 23-24.

we refer to *na Daoine*, or “the Men.” Surely, the “older men among the natives” who Wilson observed to be both “very fluent in prayer” and personally responsible for maintaining religious observance in the stead of MacKenzie bring to mind the characteristics of the class of lay catechists and elders who began to develop in the Western Islands around this time as described in Chapter Four.⁵⁵

All told, the translation of evangelicalism into a St. Kildan cultural context, the far-reaching improvements made by Neil MacKenzie both alongside and for the islanders, and the integration of the locals into the by-then-powerful ecclesiastical infrastructure resulted in a true paradigm shift from a transactional church-culture relationship to a transformation of both church and culture. The process was not a one-sided game of evangelical colonizer vs. helpless native, but rather a complex and gradual dialogue, as evangelicalism became “St. Kilda-ized” and St. Kilda became “evangelical-ized.” Was the voice of evangelicalism louder most of the time than the voice of St. Kilda? Perhaps. But St. Kilda had a determining voice nonetheless.⁵⁶

Revival

Following the first communion, Neil MacKenzie wrote:

To instruct these still more fully in the doctrines of the gospel, and above all to try and deepen their piety, I began a special meeting for them and for those who were preparing for next Communion on the evenings of Friday. In this way, from time to time at each successive Communion, a few were added to the above number; but no great or striking effect seemed to be produced. On the contrary, in many instances, notwithstanding my most earnest endeavors and fervent prayers, they seemed to be getting more cold and formal.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ For an explanation of “the Men,” see Chapter Four under “Evangelicalism and Revivalism in the Highlands and Islands: ca. 1630-1800.” No one else, as far as I am aware, has made this connection between St Kilda and *na Daoine*.

⁵⁶ The vocal metaphor is Donald Meek’s. Cf. note 6.

⁵⁷ MacKenzie, *Episode*, 33.

For the minister, “coldness” and “formality” were the opposite of “piety.” He continued: “This was the depressing state of matters till the summer of 1841.”⁵⁸ Not soon after, revival broke out. The coldness and formality of the islanders’ faith became molten and jubilant over a period of more than a year. But what caused the revival? For MacKenzie and the St. Kildans the answer was simple: God. In the most profound historically approachable sense, however, as the present author has hoped to demonstrate, the revival was caused primarily by the indigenization of evangelicalism as a result of broad local changes. In a more immediate sense, though, the revival was triggered by famine and prayer.

Though in the end famine and prayer were integrally related, the economic scarcity started first. We have an amazing piece of evidence thanks to the accidental assiduousness of James Wilson in 1841. Though he was much more interested in the information they contained about the native seafoal, he copied down MacKenzie’s memoranda from August of 1840 to July of 1841, just two months prior to that first emotional Wednesday service in September recalled later in life by Callum MacQueen. The troubles with “food and fuel” started in September 1840.

Table 2.1: Famine Timeline⁵⁹

Sept. 1840	“This is decidedly the wettest and windiest season I remember. No fuel is got yet, neither is it likely that any will be this season. How the year is to be gone through I know not. Were it not for the promise that our bread would be given and our water made sure, we would feel very uneasy.”
Oct. 1840	“Our crops our housed. The quantity of straw is large, but the grain very small. Potatoes are very defective, not above half an ordinary crop. No fuel has been got yet. Every thing seems to conspire against us this season.”
Nov. 1840	Nothing to note
Dec. 1840	“The people have never been worse off for fuel. Their provisions are not

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Wilson, *Voyage*, 74-79.

	more abundant. Last year was not good; but this one turns out a third less. Lord have mercy upon us.”
Jan. 1841	“The want of fuel is very much felt. Every good day the natives are from hill to hill, and from cliff to crevice, in search of anything that burns.”
Feb. 1841	“Our religious meetings have been regularly attended all the season. The scarcity of food and fuel, which is now felt in their intensity, gives a somber aspect to everything around us.”
Mar. 1841	Nothing to note
Apr. 1841	“No fuel as been got yet; though it should be dry for a few days, there is not a sufficient length of dry weather to dry turf. By the coming of the boat from Harris, and the arrival of the birds, their food is greatly improved. Every family got from forty to fifty of the gannets, besides small fowl. Thanks be to Almighty God for his kindness to us.”
May 1841	Nothing to note
June 1841	“The people are ill off for fuel, for they have got but little, and still worse off for food.”
July 1841	“The people are suffering very much from want of food. During spring, ere the birds came, they literally cleared the shore not only of shell-fish, but even of a species of sea-weed that grows abundantly on the rocks within the sea-mark. For a time then they were better off, particularly as long as fresh eggs could be got. Now the weather is coarse, birds cannot be found, at least in such abundance as their needs require. Sorrel boiled in water is the principal part of the food of some, and even that grass is getting scarce. All that was near exhausted and they go the rocks for it, where formerly they used to go for birds only.”

Though MacKenzie only mentioned the islanders’ lack of necessities, Wilson also noted:

“We are not sure that even the minister’s family had had a sufficiency of bread for several months. Their supply was also exhausted.”⁶⁰ Unsurprisingly, as the St. Kildans were literally starving, the minister became “greatly alarmed about their state.”⁶¹

Out of this alarm came prayer. MacKenzie “called upon all who feared God to unite in earnest prayer for an outpouring of the Holy Ghost.” His sermons during the summer and early fall of 1841 “were plain discourses addressed to the conscience, and largely intended to show the difference there must be between those who truly feared the

⁶⁰ Ibid., 25.

⁶¹ MacKenzie, *Episode*, 33.

Lord and mere formalists and hypocrites.”⁶² Out of this attitude of longing, both physically and spiritually, erupted the first signs of awakening.

Recalling the same event as Callum MacQueen, MacKenzie wrote that “on the evening of Wednesday, the 28th September, 1841, the men being mostly away at one of the islands, and those who attended being chiefly females, I was in a course of lectures explaining the petition, “Lead us not into temptation,” when in a most wonderful way the Lord gave us his answer.”⁶³ He went on:

Just when our faith was weakest, the Lord showed his power. After explaining the nature of the petition, I applied it in the most pointed way I could to their own consciences. I described the dangers to which we were exposed in consequence of our many temptations to evil, and turned their thoughts to the only means by which their power could be subdued and our souls saved.⁶⁴

He then “pointed them to Christ as a wise, powerful and merciful Savior, and urged, entreated and beseeched them to come to Him for safety and protection.” The minister then, presumably, saw to the spiritual responses of the people, as he failed to note anything for the next several days. He then picked up from Sunday, writing, “I preached from Luke 22:44, “And, being in agony,” etc. Discoursing at considerable length on the sufferings of Christ, their duration, their intensity, and above all the glorious and blessed end for which he endured them – to glorify God and save sinners.” At this point in the sermon, “the same feeling which had showed itself on Wednesday began to manifest itself.”⁶⁵

From that point on during the winter of 1841 and 1842, “new cases occurred” at “every meeting,” “or those who had already been awakened became more or less excited

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid., 33-34.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

again. The more pious members of our little congregation were wonderfully enlivened and their souls were greatly refreshed.”⁶⁶ Concerning the timeline of events and pace of life during the revival of 1841-1842, MacQueen also recalled: “The people did very little work for two years. There were meetings almost every night in the church with the minister; on Sunday, Wednesday, Thursday, in the church for communicants; Thursday in private for non-communicants.” Then, “Friday reversed this arrangement. The regular services all along in the church were 7 a.m. to 11 a.m., and in the evening.”⁶⁷ Echoing this increase in services, MacKenzie himself noted that “in addition to my former work on Sabbath and on other days of the week, I added a meeting on the evening of Thursday for those newly awakened.” With what perhaps could be another hint at the rise of a nascent form of *na Daoine* on St. Kilda, he further noted of the extra Thursday meeting that “this addition, which quite exhausted me, was not enough to satisfy, and they had in addition many meetings among themselves.”⁶⁸ Revival had enwrapped the island.

As for the “manifestations” of this first wave of revival, MacKenzie, like other illustrious awakening overseers before him such as Jonathan Edwards and William M’Culloch, kept keenly precise notes on the manners in which the people reacted to the assumed acts of God. On one hand, he briefly noted in several instances those that “melted into a state of unusual tenderness and concern” or “wept and cried aloud” at the power of his preaching. It was also not uncommon for the emotions of the awakened to drown out his sermons, causing him to pause for a hymn from the Gaelic Psalter or something similar.⁶⁹ On the other hand, he also left a highly descriptive example of the

⁶⁶ Ibid., 34-35.

⁶⁷ McQueen and McQueen, *St. Kilda Heritage*, 14-15.

⁶⁸ MacKenzie, *Episode*, 36.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 34-36.

usual series of events accompanying the awakening of an individual. He wrote: “The physical symptoms which attended this revival were in their general aspect the same, yet in every individual they varied in intensity and duration.”⁷⁰ Table 2.2 lays out what typically followed.

Table 2.2: Order of Physical Symptoms in St. Kilda Revival, 1841-42⁷¹

- 1 “At first one noticed a movement of the hands like that of one drowning, while the breathing got quicker and more laborious, and if they were women it often ended in their fainting.”
- 2 “But if they did not faint at once, in a short time they would begin to give vent to their feelings in vehement and emphatic ejaculations, ‘O, what shall I do?’ ‘My overwhelming burden!’ ‘My sins’ ‘Woe’s me!’ and probably after all end fainting. At times the scene was most distressing. Here there would be a strong man on a seat supported by two friends; there, others rolling in the dust on the floor, and perhaps one or two being carried out fainting. Some would be crying for mercy, and other expressing their various feelings in the most emphatic words.”
- 3 “At last, with an almost superhuman voice, they would cry out, ‘I have found Him whom my soul loveth,’ ‘I know that he will pardon my sins; He will pardon’. Then, looking round upon the others, they would most solemnly urge them to praise the Lord for his goodness.”

The first wave lasted about eight months. MacKenzie then noted: “When summer, or rather the latter end of spring came, the excitement attending the revival became much less intense.” At that point, the minister had a chance to assess the results. In his view, “Every decided case turned out well, but I was distressed to find that some had been mere imitators of others, and of course the hearts of these remained just as they were before.” Those who failed to materialize into cases of true conversion or reawakening, in his opinion, “were apt to rest upon their feelings instead of on the righteousness of the Son of God and bringing forth the fruit of a holy life.”⁷² This illustrates well the delicate balance and high expectations of evangelical preaching. On the one hand, MacKenzie had been

⁷⁰ Ibid., 35.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid., 36.

trying and praying for years in order for something so emotive and visibly pietistic to occur in his otherwise “cold” and “formal” island parish. Yet when it did arrive in 1841, he was wary to make sure that those who experienced such events did not fall prey to the other extreme of empty emotionalism. In any case, this first wave seemed to have been mostly well received by the minister. The summer of 1842 continued on with little disturbance.

By the fall, however, a second wave of revival began on the island. Clearly indicative of a high degree to which the evangelical faith was further appropriated by the locals during the previous winter’s events, MacKenzie noted here that he “was greatly assisted by my elders and some of our last year’s converts. Many of our evening meetings were conducted by themselves, and I only reserved for myself alone the meeting on Wednesday evening and two services on Sabbath.” Unlike the constant community of the first wave, “meetings on the mornings of Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday for conversing with inquirers” sufficed for “additional services.”⁷³ The events of the fall of 1842 also coincided, as was often the case, with the celebration of a communion.⁷⁴ Though less intense than the previous fall, the second wave nonetheless added to the overall impact of the revival.

When turning to assess the results of the revival, MacKenzie recorded changes in the community ethics, spirituality, and cultural life of the island. As for the way it shaped the local morality, he wrote, “Injuries formerly done to persons or property were freely confessed, and where possible atonement and restitution made.... Formerly envy, cunning, theft, uncleanness, Sabbath breaking, excessive talking, and irritability of

⁷³ Ibid., 36.

⁷⁴ Michael Robson, *St Kilda: Church, Visitors and ‘Natives’* (Isle of Lewis: The Islands Book Trust, 2005), 361-362.

temper breaking out on every trifling occasion into violent rage, and even profane swearing were awfully common among them.” As a result of the revival, “These are now largely of the past.”⁷⁵ In contrast to what MacKenzie saw as negative traits, he happily wrote in 1843 that the St. Kildans were “also now more diligent, obliging, kind and attentive to duty than even last year.”⁷⁶ In the first case, then, the minister saw communal reconciliation and increased local unity as results of the awakening.⁷⁷

A second, and perhaps more expected, result of the revival was an increase in the islanders’ newly cultivated evangelical faith. Though noting the spiritual fragility of the new converts, MacKenzie still remained confident “that very many of them have truly passed from darkness into light, from death to life, and from being servants of Satan to being the sons of God. The blossoms are fair and promising, and if the fruit be anything in proportion, it will be a matter of praise to not a few to all eternity.” Quoting the Apostle Paul from Philippians 1, he then said, “I earnestly pray that he who has begun a good work may himself carry it on to perfection through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”⁷⁸ In sum, the minister was quite sure that the workings of God upon the hearts of his people had started them on the long and narrow path of holy Christian living.

A continuation in the process of cultural transformation toward a St. Kildan evangelicalism marked a third and final result recorded by the minister. Evangelicalism, if we take MacKenzie at his word, increasingly became a way of life for the locals, where it had once been largely foreign to their worldviews. The minister wrote:

For several years past family worship was generally observed, but in too many cases as a mere matter of form. Yet now that duty is not only continued in the

⁷⁵ MacKenzie, *Episode*, 36-37.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Meek notes this as well in “Reexamination,” 137.

⁷⁸ MacKenzie, *Episode*, 38.

letter, but also in the spirit. Private prayer has also become very common. Behind walls, in outhouses, and among the hills are the place where prayer is wont to be made. Their attendance at all the means of grace has also become most exemplary; nothing but serious illness will keep them from the house of God. The Bible and other religious books, of which I have been able to secure for them a sufficient supply, are carefully read and studied.⁷⁹

In the awakening of 1841-1842, St. Kildan evangelicalism – both uniquely St. Kildan and broadly evangelical – began to solidify as the primary expression of local culture. At the time, however, Neil MacKenzie was simply happy to report that: “I feel sure that there has been a true work of grace in their souls.”⁸⁰

Assessment and Conclusions

From the start, John MacDonald of Ferintosh and Neil MacKenzie preached to the St. Kildans with the hopes of awakening them to a robust and reverent evangelical piety. Like growing barley on a sea-swept island, though, their hopes required time and effort in order to see fulfillment. MacDonald sowed the seeds of cultural and religious change in the 1820s by introducing the people of St. Kilda to the evangelical form of Protestant Christianity. Though Neil MacKenzie was less than pleased with MacDonald’s efforts, he nevertheless continued to cultivate the same fields. Through a process of ideological and cultural transformation, physical, religious, and educational improvement, and rising local self-determination, the harvest slowly ripened. In a strange twist of fate – or Providence, to those involved – the fruits of the labor of twenty years’ ministry overflowed the storehouses at a time when the real grain was scarce. In the famine of 1840-1841, the people of St. Kilda joined their minister in a time of intense introspection and prayer. When they least expected it, as MacKenzie would later note, the faith and piety of the St. Kildans began to burn with a white heat that continued to burn for over a

⁷⁹ Ibid., 37.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 38.

year. Consequently, the revival of 1841-1842 noticeably impacted the social, spiritual, and cultural life of the entire island, yet further internalizing the changes wrought by MacKenzie and the islanders in the 1830s. As this chapter has sought to illustrate, by 1843 the labors of MacDonald and MacKenzie, regardless of whether one agrees with the impetus or means of affecting those labors, had not been in vain.

CHAPTER THREE

MACKENZIE AND REVIVAL BEYOND ST KILDA

The events on St. Kilda did not occur in an historical or geographical vacuum. An exploration of the hitherto under-researched personal and theological networks of Neil MacKenzie sheds new light on both the clergyman's views on revival and departure from St. Kilda in 1844. Further, and as Donald Meek and others have rightly pointed out, the indigenization and revivalist characteristics of evangelicalism on St. Kilda mirrored contemporary events and ideas throughout the Highlands and Islands regionally and the Scottish nation more broadly.¹

Mapping MacKenzie*Departure and Final Years*

MacKenzie remained on St. Kilda during the year 1843. But he would not be there much longer. Around that time, he wistfully wrote:

It appears to me that my work here is now finished, and that I would be more useful somewhere else. I have therefore made up my mind, as there is an opportunity, to leave the island for a time, and it may be for ever. The labors and anxieties of the past two years have told heavily, both on my bodily health and mental vigor, and I need a time of rest and mental refreshment. I wish, also, to be present at the coming General Assembly. I have thought and prayed a great deal over the important question in dispute, and yet my mind is far from seeing clearly what is my duty. I will listen to what may be said, and pray for guidance. I can trust God to show me what will be most for His glory.²

¹ Donald Meek, "'Eileanaich Cian a' Chuain' / 'The Remote Islanders of the Sea'?: Towards a Reexamination of the Role of Church and Faith in St. Kilda," in *Rewriting St Kilda: New Views on Old Ideas*, ed. Bob Chambers (Isle of Lewis: The Islands Book Trust, 2010), 102-105.

² J.B. (John Bannatyne) MacKenzie, *Episode in the Life of the Rev. Neil MacKenzie at St. Kilda from 1829 to 1843* (Privately Printed, 1911), 38.

In May of that same year, in Edinburgh, over four hundred Evangelical ministers walked out of the Church of Scotland General Assembly and formed a new ecclesial entity: the Free Church of Scotland. This unprecedented schism, though long in the making, sent shockwaves throughout the nation. As such, MacKenzie's "important question in dispute" regarding the General Assembly was probably related to that very same event, known later simply as the Disruption.³

Though ostensibly for only a holiday, MacKenzie and his family left the island in the early summer of 1844. Indeed, some reports indicate that he was supposed to have returned. Yet by 5 July, the minister had already accepted a call to the Established Church at Duror, on the mainland. The "important question" had been settled.⁴ From Duror, he transferred to the established Kirk at Kilchrenan, Argyllshire, where he spent the majority of his remaining years. Upon retirement, he moved to Glasgow to stay with one of his daughters. He died in 1879. His body was brought back to Kilchrenan, where it rests to this day.⁵

Neil MacKenzie: Middle Party Revivalist?

The fact that the man responsible for transforming the world of St. Kilda and leading them in an expressive, evangelical religious revival left the island in 1844 raises a

³ Douglas Ansdell, in "Disruptions and Controversies in the Highland Church," in *The Church in the Highlands*, ed. James Kirk, 89-113 (Inverness: Scottish Church History Society, 1998), 101-104, provides a helpful picture of the effects of Disruption on St Kilda. In the Synod of Glenelg, comprised of the Presbytery of Uist and Parish of St Kilda, twenty-six out of forty ministers decided to remain within the Church of Scotland. This number, however, skews the reality of the situation. Though the clergy of the Highlands and Islands were fairly evenly split over the issues at hand (patronage, etc.), the people themselves were overwhelmingly supportive of the Free Church. Ansdell goes on to posit why this may have been the case. He agrees with the dominant idea that the ethos of evangelicalism in the Highlands and Islands was more intense than elsewhere, and that rural areas evince higher religiosity. In his view, though, the novelty of evangelicalism to some areas in the region caused the people to seek within the Free Church an infrastructure to accommodate their young style faith.

⁴ Michael Robson, *St Kilda: Church, Visitors and 'Natives'* (Isle of Lewis: The Islands Book Trust, 2005), 366-369.

⁵ Andrew Fleming, *St Kilda and the Wider World: Tales of an Iconic Island* (Bollington, Cheshire: Windgather Press Ltd, 2005), 143.

number of important questions that force the discussion beyond the local: How did he get information? What did he know about revival? Where along the spectrum of evangelicalism did MacKenzie fall? Why did he leave? In order to answer these questions and gain a fuller understanding of the St. Kilda experience, it becomes necessary to explore the non-insular networks and ecclesiastical position of the minister himself.

First, he first made several trips to the mainland. He left the island in the spring of 1832. In Glasgow at least, he wrote an update letter to the SSPCK, headquartered in Edinburgh, and took time to see friends. In 1835 he took another, less specified trip. In 1838, he again left the island. The activities of this trip provide us with the richest external information about the minister of St. Kilda. First in Glasgow, MacKenzie then proceeded to Edinburgh in June for the SSPCK meeting, where he presented a report of his work on the island. The SSPCK was pleased with his progress and also sent him back with all of the issues of a new religious periodical, *The Scottish Christian Herald*, available to date. By July he was back in Glasgow. There, he purchased supplies for his family and articles for the new houses, the latter being funded by Dr. Norman MacLeod of Glasgow. As it was around this time, it will be recalled, that MacKenzie thought his small congregation ready to receive the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, he returned in July of 1838 with Dr. MacLeod and Dr. David Dickson of St Cuthbert's, Edinburgh to oversee the first Communion. MacKenzie's final trip off the island until his departure was that of the spring of 1840. He again went to Edinburgh to attend the SSPCK meeting, and returned to St. Kilda in late June.⁶

⁶ Robson, *St Kilda*, 327-349.

Beyond his personal interactions, MacKenzie also kept up with news on rare occasions via print media. In the early years, he remarked that he wished for more newspapers and magazines to occupy his intellect.⁷ In 1839 Lachlan MacLean noted that: “The clergyman of St. Kilda received just one whole one for three years; and that same took eighteen months to go through the Celtic post offices.”⁸ Though this may have been an exaggeration, another author notes that his news diet was indeed a year behind.⁹ Based on this information, we can only surmise that for most of the year he was only peripherally aware of the goings on beyond the beach of Village Bay. What we do know, however, is that in 1838 he was given two years’ worth of *The Scottish Christian Herald*. And that information is key.

The Scottish Christian Herald, or *Christian Herald*, was an inexpensive, evangelical weekly founded in 1836 and printed out of Edinburgh.¹⁰ In total, it ran two series, from 1836-1838 and 1839-1841. Its express purpose was to discourage “infidelity” within Scottish evangelicalism. In contrast, it recounted events and promoted an agenda aimed at “carrying ‘religion home to the heart’.”¹¹ Critical to the events of 1841-1842 on St. Kilda, the *Christian Herald* was also deeply interested in revival accounts, prayer movements for an increase in revival, and the nature of revival.¹² This means that in 1838

⁷ MacKenzie, in Robson, *St Kilda*, 335.

⁸ Lachlan MacLean, “Sketches of the Island Saint Kilda; comprising of Manners and Maxims of the Natives, Ancient and Modern; together with the Ornithology, Geology, Etymology, Domology, and other curiosities of that unique island; taken down, for the greater part, from the oral narration of the Rev. N. M’Kenzie, at present, and for the last eight years, Clergyman of the Island,” *The Calcutta Christian Observer*, January to December, 1839, accessed March 9, 2014, http://books.google.com/books?id=qrUOAAAIAAJ&dq=lachlan%20maclean%20st%20kilda%20calcutta%201838&source=gbs_book_other_versions, 337.

⁹ Fleming *St Kilda and the Wider World*, 131.

¹⁰ Nigel M. de S. Cameron (ed.), *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 654.

¹¹ David A. Currie, “The Growth of Evangelicalism in the Church of Scotland, 1793-1843” (PhD diss., University of St. Andrews, Scotland, 1990), 114.

¹² *Ibid.*, 115-117.

Neil MacKenzie had a backlog of an evangelical periodical almost specifically focused on revival. The implications are obvious. When, after praying for revival among his own people, the revival of 1841 broke out, MacKenzie would have been keenly familiar with what to expect, encourage, and beware of as the movement unfolded.

The directors and authors of the magazine attempted to keep the contents free from ecclesiastical sectarianism, despite the highly Evangelical readership. They also kept explicit references to the Church of Scotland as a part of the layout in order to maintain propriety. Despite these efforts, the last edition rolled off the press in 1841. As the Disruption loomed, many of the contributors to the otherwise non-sectarian *Christian Herald* polarized and prepared for the Assembly of 1843. Following the Disruption, 40% of the living contributors remained in the established Church, while the other 60% opted for the Free Church. According to David A. Currie, this “reflected the sizeable number of ministers remaining in the Auld Kirk after 1843 who supported its [*The Scottish Christian Herald*] devotional approach.”¹³

This, in turn, leads to the questions of MacKenzie’s place along the partisan spectrum of 1840s Scottish churchmanship and his decision to leave St. Kilda. On one hand, Rev. Neil MacKenzie was admittedly somewhat removed from the whole ecclesiastical and theological fracas of the decade prior to the Disruption, known as the Ten Years’ Conflict. As such it is difficult to place him explicitly in any party. It is the present author’s contention, however, that MacKenzie can most appropriately be located

¹³ Ibid., 117-126, 403.

in what came to be known as the Middle Party¹⁴, due to his personal relationships and final decision to stay within the Church of Scotland so established.

In the first place, MacKenzie had relationships with two prominent Highland evangelicals associated with the Middle Party: Drs. Daniel Dewar and Norman MacLeod. Daniel Dewar was born in Perthshire in 1788. Educated in Glasgow, London, and Edinburgh, he was eventually elected Chair of Moral Philosophy at King's College, Aberdeen. From there, he became minister of Tron Church, Glasgow from 1819 to 1832. During his Glaswegian incumbency, he also released two works not unrelated to the work of MacKenzie and the church on St. Kilda. In 1829, he published *The Gaelic Preacher and Scripture Interpreter*, and in 1831, *A Dictionary of the Gaelic Language*.¹⁵

During this period in Glasgow, Dewar also met Neil MacKenzie. The academician and churchman, as noted in Chapter Two, was the individual responsible for initially calling and eventually persuading MacKenzie to accept the post on St. Kilda.¹⁶ As such, MacKenzie more than likely had a good personal relationship with Dewar and enough respect for him to be persuaded by his 1830 overtures. From Tron Church, Glasgow, Dewar returned to Aberdeen as Principal of Marischal College from 1832-1860. Of his decision in 1843, Hew Scott noted: "He took a prominent part in the movement which led to the Secession of 1843, but declined to sign the Protest."¹⁷ In

¹⁴ The Middle Party was named as such due to its mediating place between the two main parties: the Evangelicals and Moderates. Under the guidance of Rev. Matthew Leishman of Govan, this contingent of 45 evangelical ministers decided to stay within the fold of the established Church in the name of unity, despite sharing a disregard for patronage with those who joined the Free Church. See Nigel M. de S. Cameron (ed.), *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 561-562

¹⁵ Hew Scott, *Fasti Ecclesiae Scotticae* vol. VII (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1928), 361.

¹⁶ Robson, *St Kilda*, 311-312.

¹⁷ Scott, *Fasti*, 361.

other words, Dewar opted for the Middle Party. This must have been a contributing factor to MacKenzie's own decision in 1844.

The other Middle Party influence was Dr. Norman MacLeod. MacLeod was born in Argyllshire in 1783, and educated at the Universities of Edinburgh and Glasgow. Having held previous ministerial posts in Campbeltown and Campsie, he spent the majority of his career, from 1835 to 1862, at St. Columba's, Glasgow. As an indication of his prominence, he moderated the General Assembly of 1836.¹⁸ It was in the third year of his ministry at St. Columba's, in 1838, that he donated the furniture money and travelled with Dr. Dickson and MacKenzie to St. Kilda for the Communion. Along with the time spent between them on their journey and on the island, MacKenzie and MacLeod would have also have connected over their mutual interest in Gaelic literacy. Scott noted that, "He distinguished himself by great and benevolent exertions on behalf of his Highland countrymen, especially in regard to education," and that, "He will always be affectionately known as *Caraid nan Gaidheal* (friend of the Highlanders)."¹⁹ He, too, was published in the field of Gaelic mission and education. In 1828, he released a *Gaelic Collection for the Use of Schools*, followed by the two-volume *The Gaelic Messenger* in 1830-31. Finally, in 1831 he edited the *Dictionary of the Gaelic Language* with none other than Dr. Daniel Dewar.²⁰ Like Dewar, MacLeod opted for unity in 1843 and stayed in. Unlike Dewar, however, MacLeod was actually a noted leader of the Middle Party

¹⁸ Nigel M. de S. Cameron (ed.), *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 532.

¹⁹ Hew Scott, *Fasti Ecclesiae Scotticanae* vol. III (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1928), 437.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

movement.²¹ As such, it seems likely that MacLeod also exerted a certain amount of influence on the St. Kilda clergyman toward that position.

In the end, though, it was MacKenzie's decision to make. And as he noted himself, it was not an easy decision. One author suggests that he may have left because he heard about a parish left vacant in the wake of the Disruption.²² Another posits that he left for fear of being cast out among the locals should he have opted for the Free Church.²³ The first is possible, even probable. The second seems unlikely, as he had by then endeared himself to the islanders through transformation and revival. What we do know, through his own writings, the revival, and his association with *The Scottish Christian Herald*, is that Neil MacKenzie cherished evangelical doctrine and practice. However, he also had close associations to two prominent evangelical churchmen who remained in the Church of Scotland in 1843. Teetering on the edge between Free Church and the Church of Scotland, with associations and convictions in each, MacKenzie addressed the "important question in dispute" by finally opting for a mediating position in which he could both retain his evangelical faith and stay within the fold of the national Church.

Regional Connections: Revival in the Hebrides

As with Neil MacKenzie personally, the St. Kilda revival of 1841-1842 must be seen in a wider, regional context in order to properly appreciate its place in history.²⁴

²¹ Nigel M. de S. Cameron (ed.), *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 561-562.

²² Robson, *St Kilda*, 368-369.

²³ Fleming *St Kilda and the Wider World*, 141.

²⁴ Donald Meek recently challenged scholars to do as much: "The research question we should now tackle is not, 'How peculiar was St Kilda in and of itself?' It is, 'How did St Kilda fit into, or differ from, the wider patterns of the Highlands and Hebrides'." It is the intention of the present author to ask these

Though the next chapter will explore the historical continuities of evangelicalism and revivalism in the Highlands and Islands more broadly, it is here worth noting some brief, more immediate background. At the time of the revival on St. Kilda, revival movements were ubiquitous throughout the Northern Highlands and Western Isles. An 1842 revival on Skye spread throughout the region, leading to other revivals in places such as Harris.²⁵ Perhaps not surprisingly, John MacDonald of Ferintosh was at the center of many of them. As the revivals of the era spread, ministers often travelled from other parishes to assist in the preaching and pastoral counseling. Concerning St. Kilda, Robson surmises: “For all their isolation neither the St. Kilda people nor their minister could remain unaware of these spectacular events.”²⁶

The revival on Skye in the 1830s and 1840s presents the best case, or series of cases, with which to compare and contrast the St. Kildan experience.²⁷ This is true for a number of reasons. Perhaps foremost among them, another author recently described the 1840s Skye revival as an “apex” in Skye evangelicalism. She even goes so far as to call it “the point at which Evangelicalism was clearly hegemonic on the island.”²⁸ This almost seamlessly parallels the case of St. Kilda, where the indigenization of evangelicalism and cultural transformation of the 1830s paved the way for revival in 1841, thereby cementing itself in the island’s collective psyche.

questions, as they relate to the revival, in the section at hand. See “‘Eileanaich Cian a’ Chuain’ / ‘The Remote Islanders of the Sea’? Towards a Reexamination of the Role of Church and Faith in St Kilda,” in *Rewriting St Kilda: New Views on Old Ideas*, ed. Bob Chambers (Isle of Lewis: The Islands Book Trust, 2010), 143.

²⁵ John MacKay, *The Church in the Highlands: or the Progress of Evangelical Religion in Gaelic Scotland, 1563-1843* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1914), 266.

²⁶ Robson, *St Kilda*, 360.

²⁷ Steve Taylor’s *The Skye Revivals* (Chichester, UK: New Wine Press, 2003) is the source upon which I rely for most for this section, as it wonderfully provides excerpts from primary sources unavailable to the present author in the original. In order to differentiate between original authors and Taylor, I will cite their names, when used, followed by the page number in Taylor.

²⁸ See Elizabeth Ritchie, “The faith of the crofters: Skye and South Uist, 1793-1843,” (PhD diss., University of Guelph, 2010), 137.

Beyond these parallels, the revival accounts from Skye evince a high degree of similarity relating to immediate causation, course of events, physical manifestations, and results. First, the St. Kilda revival and the Skye revivals shared two commonalities relating to their emergence. An example from Skye in 1838 mirrors the more immediate causes from St. Kilda. In St. Kilda, it was famine, followed by prayer for a movement of God. In Uig, Skye, it was much the same. Angus Ferguson, a Baptist from Mull, came to Skye in 1836.²⁹ In response to a smallpox epidemic on the island, in March of 1838 the Baptists of Uig took time “for beseeching the Lord to pour out his Spirit upon ourselves and others. We sought the Lord by prayer and supplication, with fasting. We confessed our sins and backslidings, and pleaded forgiveness through the blood of Jesus.”³⁰ As in St. Kilda, disaster and prayer precipitated a spiritual breakthrough.

The more widespread Skye revival of 1842 also shared a causative quality with St. Kilda. In this case, the topics of the sermons preached just prior to the initial eruption both focused on drawing the audience to a fuller understanding of their status before God apart from Christ. In the case of MacKenzie on St. Kilda, the sermon he preached on 28 September 1841 reminded the audience of their weakness to temptations. Likewise, the 15 May 1842 sermon of Rev. Norman MacLeod of Unish, Skye challenged his audience to examine themselves for spiritual fruit, lest they wither away.³¹ Again, in both cases the emphasis of God’s high standards and man’s inability struck the consciences of the listeners and awakened them to revival.

The Skye revival of 1842 also followed a similar course of events. In both cases, passionate evangelical clergymen acted as the primary leaders in the revivals. For St.

²⁹ Taylor, *Skye Revivals*, 76.

³⁰ Angus Ferguson in Taylor, *Skye Revivals*, 76.

³¹ Taylor, *Skye Revivals*, 45. The sermon was based on Mark 11.

Kilda, of course, it was Neil MacKenzie. In Skye, however, there were two. The first was Norman MacLeod of Unish, on the Waternish Peninsula. Born in 1773 on Skye, he had a first career as a soldier. After his service, he returned to Edinburgh, where he was converted under the influence of John MacDonald of Ferintosh around 1810. From Edinburgh he returned to Skye, where he acted as the Gaelic Schoolmaster in Kilmuir until 1839. In that year, he became the Gaelic Schoolmaster in Unish. In 1842 his tenure in the village was coming to an end. On the Sabbath of 15 May, however, he preached two sermons that caught hold of the audience to such an effect as to spark a revival. The initial movement lasted sixteen days, with MacLeod barely getting any rest.³²

The second Skyeman involved in the revival of 1842 was Rev. Roderick MacLeod of Snizort. Born in his future parish in 1794, he later attended Aberdeen University and was ordained in 1819. Though not initially evangelical in his convictions, the death of his mother in 1821 caused him to wrestle with his personal faith. This resulted in his conversion. He was minister of the Parish of Bracadale, Skye from 1823 to 1837, and widely known for his piety and exclusive views on the use on the sacraments. He also, like MacKenzie, was keen to have a literate church body and made efforts to that end. In 1837 he was presented to the Parish of Snizort. In the summer of 1842, he was a key preacher in the revival services that spawned from the initial preaching of Norman MacLeod of Unish.³³

From the initial movement in Unish of May, 1842, the revival spread. First, the services moved to a nearby village called Stein. From there, they moved to an even more

³² Ibid., 43-46.

³³ Ibid., 53-64. Regarding his interest in education, it must have been convenient to have Norman MacLeod of St. Columba's, Glasgow, the Gaelic translator and education specialist, as a cousin. See Nigel M. de S. Cameron (ed.), *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 533.

central location at Fairy Bridge. Wherever they met, vast crowds gathered for preaching. Many of the audience members either walked or sailed considerable distances to hear the sermons and experience the spiritual excitement. From the Waternish Peninsula, the revival spread throughout the Isle of Skye, even as far as the outlying islands of Rum and Eigg.³⁴

Beyond causation and general characteristics, the manifestations of revival on St. Kilda and Skye overlapped considerably in their description. On St. Kilda, MacKenzie recorded manifestations that included, but were not limited to, “melting,” weeping, and “crying out.” As for the morphology of an awakening experience, he noted a series of steps apparent in a number of those affected: nervous movement (often followed by fainting), verbal expressions of guilt (again, often followed by fainting or falling down and rolling), and finally verbal expressions of salvation and elated sharing with others.³⁵

On Skye it was much the same. Rev. Roderick MacLeod of Snizort described some of the events of 1842, saying: “The most extraordinary emotions appeared among the people; some wept and some cried aloud as if pricked in their hearts, while others fainted and fell down as if struck dead.”³⁶ Rev. Donald Fraser of Kirkhill, who came over from the mainland with his friend Rev. Donald MacDonald of Urray, also recorded examples of the manifestations. He wrote: “What an ordinary congregation would hear with composure, affected them, so that many trembled, others wept aloud, and some fainted. It was an altogether striking scene.”³⁷ Accordingly, the manifestations

³⁴ Taylor, *Skye Revivals*, 46-47.

³⁵ See Table 2.2.

³⁶ Rev. Roderick MacLeod of Snizort in Taylor, *Skye Revivals*, 45.

³⁷ Rev. Donald Fraser of Kirkhill in Taylor, *Skye Revivals*, 69-70.

accompanying revival on St. Kilda were not unique phenomena. Indeed, they shared nearly all the characteristics as those seen in the revival on Skye.

Another unique similarity, still regarding manifestations, concerned a paradigmatic piece of evangelical revival accounts. As C.C. Goen notes in his introduction to Jonathan Edwards' revival works, the published accounts of the Northampton minister's awakening movement in the 1730s became the standard by which to measure and interpret revival within the transatlantic evangelical community for the next century and beyond.³⁸ One of the tropes involved, as with Edwards' most famous sermon, the loud emotions of the audience drowning out the preaching of the sermon.³⁹ Both the St. Kilda and Skye ministers told this type of story in the 1840s. MacKenzie wrote on one occasion:

As I preached, the feelings of many became strongly excited. Able men as well as feeble women wept and cried aloud. At last the excitement became so great that I could not be heard, so I gave out a Psalm to be sung till the extreme tension of their feelings should subside a little; but the precentor could not sing, and I had to lead the Psalm myself with only a few tremulous voices singing.⁴⁰

In similar language, Fraser of Kirkhill wrote of Skye in 1842: "During the sermon it was necessary to stop twice and sing some verse of a psalm to calm their excited feeling, so impressionable were their minds at the time."⁴¹ Again, the St. Kilda experience of 1841-1842 fit well within the broader scope of the revival movements in the Highlands and Islands of the era.

Finally, the progression and results of revival on St. Kilda also mirrored the events on Skye. As for the progression on St. Kilda, MacKenzie noted that the second

³⁸ See Goen's introduction to *The Great Awakening*, vol. 4, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 27.

³⁹ George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 220-221.

⁴⁰ MacKenzie, *Episode*, 34.

⁴¹ Rev. Donald Fraser of Kirkhill in Taylor, *Skye Revivals*, 69.

wave of revival in the autumn of 1842 was less marked in its emotions and manifestations. Two Skye ministers made similar observations. Rev. James MacQueen, a Baptist in Broadford, Skye, noted: "As to the revival, things are more moderate. The crying and fainting are dying away in most places, but the desire to hear is the same."⁴² Rev. John Swanson of Rum, an island off the coast of Skye, also mentioned a "gradual subsiding" in the "excitement" as the movement carried forward.⁴³ Regarding results, the Skyeman shared MacKenzie's belief that many were awakened and lives were changed. The morality of the island, again like St. Kilda, appeared to have been reset among evangelical lines.⁴⁴ As demonstrated in these comparisons, the St. Kilda revival had much in common with other movements of the time and region, most notably the Skye revival of 1842. Thus the events and activities of the St. Kilda awakening were, in many cases, not uniquely St. Kildan.

At the same time, the St. Kilda revival remained distinct from Skye and other localities on a number of counts. First and most obviously, St. Kilda was small. With a population around 100 persons, the audience was limited *de facto*. In contrast, Rev. Roderick MacLeod of Snizort preached at Fairy Bridge to a crowd of possibly 9,000.⁴⁵ Second, St. Kilda had only one minister, a Presbyterian of the Church of Scotland, to lead the revival. On Skye, the revival was both multi-denominational, involving established and dissenting clergy, and well staffed with men like Fraser of Kirkhill, who traveled from elsewhere to lend a hand. Third and lastly, St. Kildans had no way to spread the revival. They had neither the luxury nor the means to get off the island for such a

⁴² Rev. James MacQueen of Broadford (Baptist) in Taylor, *Skye Revivals*, 70-71.

⁴³ Rev. John Swanson of Rum in Taylor, *Skye Revivals*, 92.

⁴⁴ Taylor, *Skye Revivals*, 48-49.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 58.

purpose. On Skye, however, with a population of around 25,000 and proximity to Wester Ross and other islands, the spread of revival was simpler and more organic.⁴⁶

In sum, the revival on St. Kilda in 1841-42 needs to be seen in the context of other spiritual awakenings in the Highlands and Islands in order to appreciate its place in the broader Hebridean context. A comparison with Skye provides this regional nuance. As Ritchie noted, the same processes of evangelical diffusion and cultural transformation at work on St. Kilda in the 1830s and 1840s were at work within the region as a whole.

National Connections: Kilsyth, Glasgow, and the Nature of Revival

However, the rise of evangelicalism and revivalism in the Highlands and Islands is only a piece, though a critical piece, of the contemporary context in which revival swept the island of St. Kilda in the 1840s. In order to more fully understand what began on 28 September 1841 in the church at Village Bay, we need to consider the revival in a national context as well. To this end, the narrative heads southwest, to the Parish of Kilsyth.

William Chalmers Burns and the Kilsyth Revival of 1839

Though revival was a prominent feature of Scottish evangelicalism throughout its history⁴⁷, the 1830s and 1840s saw a marked increase in spiritual awakenings.⁴⁸ A revival in the Parish of Kilsyth, Lanarkshire, under the preaching ministry of Rev. William Chalmers Burns marked a high point in this national development. Born in the town of Dun in 1815, he moved to Kilsyth when his father, William Hamilton Burns, was

⁴⁶ Ibid., 48.

⁴⁷ Chapter Four discusses this historical trend in more detail.

⁴⁸ John Wolfe, *The Expansion of Evangelicalism: The Age of Wilberforce, More, Chalmers and Finney* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 86.

presented to that Parish in 1821. He then went north as a lad to Aberdeen Grammar School and on to Aberdeen University. After period of coursework, he left university and moved to Edinburgh to work as a law clerk for his uncle. In this period, he experienced an evangelical conversion. In light of his new faith, he returned to university, completed his studies in Divinity, and in 1839 obtained licensure from the Presbytery of Glasgow.⁴⁹ Not long after this, he traveled back to his father's parish to assist in a Communion season. As was common, the spiritual atmosphere of the sacramental occasion sparked revival.

In a letter marked 30 September 1839 and published in the December edition of *The Evangelical Magazine and Missionary Chronicle*, Rev. W.H. Burns described the events that had lately unfolded in his parish. According to the minister, murmurings of revival began earlier in the year through a missionary meeting and increase in prayer. However, the general feeling of sobriety persisted until Tuesday 23 July. On that assigned day, William Chalmers Burns was asked to preach in the open air to a large audience before he departed for a stint in Dundee.⁵⁰ In response to his sermon, “a decidedly and unquestionable religious revival took place.”⁵¹ Following the initial burst of spiritual renewal, the revival carried on through July and August, with nightly meetings and huge crowds. By September, it was decided that a second Communion

⁴⁹ Rev. Peter Anton, *Kilsyth: A Parish History* (Glasgow: John Smith & Son, 1883), 223-225, accessed March 26, 2014,

<http://books.google.com/books?id=XmIjAAAAMAAJ&pg=PA198&dq=kilsyth+revival+1839&hl=en&sa=X&ei=qWkzU5iKCeXQsQSm1oDYAg&ved=0CFIQ6AEwBw#v=onepage&q=%20revival%20&f=false>

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ William Hamilton Burns, “Being the substance of a statement by the Rev. Mr. Burns, Minister of the Parish: drawn up at the request of the Presbytery of Glasgow,” *The Evangelical Magazine and Missionary Chronicle*, December 1839, 602,

<http://books.google.com/books?id=a00oAAAAYAAJ&pg=PA601&dq=kilsyth+revival+1839&hl=en&sa=X&ei=qWkzU5iKCeXQsQSm1oDYAg&ved=0CC8Q6AEwAQ#v=onepage&q=kilsyth%20revival%201839&f=false>

should be held. At this event, according to W.H. Burns, attendance reached possibly 15,000.⁵² After this second Communion, the crowds dispersed.⁵³ Rev. William Maxwell Hetherington of Torphichen, a colleague of the elder Burns, also provided a description of the events for the readers of *The Scottish Christian Herald*. He attempted to blend in, so as obtain an honest report from those affected. Upon his investigation, he concluded that the revival was unquestionably valid, due in large part to the re-establishment of piety and good morals.⁵⁴

St. Kilda Connections

Though differing in matter of degree, the Kilsyth awakening of 1839 impacted the St. Kilda revival of 1841-1842 in a number of ways. First, the revival of 1839 spread throughout Scotland, reaching as far north as Perthshire and Rossshire.⁵⁵ As such, the Lowland movement interacted with concurrent Highland revivals like those on Skye in the later part of the 1830s and early 1840s. Second, there is virtually no chance that Neil MacKenzie was unfamiliar with the Kilsyth events. For one, in 1840, the St. Kilda minister traveled to Edinburgh in order to attend the SSPCK General Meeting.⁵⁶ It seems highly unlikely that on that trip, during which he also probably stayed in Glasgow, he never discussed with any of his evangelical brethren what must have been a highly popular piece of recent news. In fact, several of MacKenzie's own known associates took part in the Kilsyth movement. W.H. Burns wrote that MacDonald of Ferintosh rendered

⁵² Ibid., 605-606.

⁵³ Anton, *Kilsyth*, 229.

⁵⁴ W.M. Hetherington, "A Brief Account of the Revival of Religion at Kilsyth: in a Letter to a Friend," *The Scottish Christian Herald*, October 19, 1839, http://books.google.com/books?id=fJYQAAAIAAJ&pg=PA657&dq=kilsyth+revival+1839&hl=en&sa=X&ei=kG4zU6T3NojTsASP_IDgDA&ved=0CFYQ6AEwCDgK#v=onepage&q=kilsyth%20revival%201839&f=false.

⁵⁵ Wolffe, *Expansion*, 86.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

“ready and efficient services” at the revival, and that Dr. Dewar assisted in preaching the second Communion.⁵⁷

MacKenzie also likely knew of Kilsyth through popular evangelical periodicals like *The Scottish Christian Herald*, with which he was already associated by 1838. As to whether or not he read *The Scottish Christian Herald* beyond 1838, it again seems likely that he did. If, as Lachlan MacLean observed in 1839, MacKenzie lacked access to news from beyond the island, his 1840 trip would have given him ample opportunity to remedy the situation. Further, having worn out his collection of weeklies from 1836-1838, he would probably have been keen to get up to date on the state of “vital religion” in Scotland. In sum, through both personal contacts and printed reports, MacKenzie’s almost certain awareness of the Kilsyth revival of 1839 prepared him further for both the propagation and management of his own church’s revival two short years later.

Commonalities

As with the Skye revivals, this major Lowland revival shared an incredible number of characteristics with the awakening on St. Kilda. Like MacKenzie’s work on the island in the 1830s, Hetherington noted of W.H. Burns that “the utmost pains have been taken... to promote the progress of vital religion among his people” through the employment of Sabbath Schools, prayer meetings, and other means.⁵⁸ As for more immediate causes, again there was an outpouring of prayer. In assessment, the elder Burns observed that, “Prayer united, as well as secret, for the bestowal of the Spirit’s influence, is most important, and will sooner or later be heard.”⁵⁹

⁵⁷ William Hamilton Burns, “Being the substance, etc.,” 604-606.

⁵⁸ W.M. Hetherington, “A Brief Account,” 657.

⁵⁹ William Hamilton Burns, “Being the substance, etc.,” 608.

As might be expected, the sermon topic that led to the initial outburst was equally similar. Like MacKenzie and Norman MacLeod of Unish, William Chalmers Burns' July 23rd sermon appealed directly to the listeners' consciences and the dangers of eternal divine separation. According to his father's account:

He pressed immediate acceptance of Christ, each for himself – when referring to the affecting and awful state, in which he dreaded the thought of leaving so many of them whom he now saw probably for the last time – when, again and again, as he saw his words telling on the audience, beseeching sinners, old and young, to embrace Christ and be saved – when he was at the height of his appeal, with the words “no cross no crown,” – then it was that the emotions of the audience were most overpoweringly expressed.⁶⁰

As the above report began to show, the manifestations of the St. Kilda revival also mirrored those of Kilsyth in 1839. In his personal account, the younger Burns himself described the results of his first message: “At last the people's feelings became too strong for all ordinary restraints, and broke forth simultaneously in weeping and wailing, tears and groans, intermingled with shouts of joy and praise from some of the people of God.”⁶¹ As with MacKenzie and the islanders, he also reported faintings.⁶² Thus the manifestations were, on the whole, highly similar across the Scottish revival landscape.

Following close at the heels of the initial manifestations, W.C. Burns also recorded another instance of (we might by now call) the Edwardsian pause paradigm. He went on: “Such was the general commotion occasioned by the most free and urgent invitations of the Lord to sinners, I was obliged to give out a psalm, which was soon joined in by a considerable number.”⁶³ Finally, the revivals at Kilsyth and St. Kilda both resulted in an alleged decline in social ills. Hetherington noted: “Drunkenness, which

⁶⁰ Ibid., 603.

⁶¹ W.C. Burns, quoted in Anton, *Kilsyth*, 228-229

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

formerly prevailed to a great degree, strife, railing, evil-speaking, political agitation, and animosity, are, for the present, completely suspended.”⁶⁴ When seen within this broader national context, the St. Kilda revival of 1841-1842 again appears less of an anomaly and more in line with the larger religious movement of the age.

On the Nature of Revival

In concluding a chapter devoted almost exclusively to contextualizing the revival on St. Kilda, it is briefly worth exploring the ideological context in which Neil MacKenzie understood the nature of religious revival. For the historian, as Chapter Four discusses in more depth, the interpretive frameworks for understanding revival are as numerous as the interpreters. To a degree, this must also have been the case for those immediately involved. Indeed as MacKenzie himself noted, no two cases were the same.⁶⁵ At the same time, due in part to the similarities of recorded accounts across the nation, there must have been standards by which to view these phenomena. Indeed there were.

The ministers involved in the Kilsyth awakening of 1839 assembled in Glasgow in 1840 “for the purpose of communicating right views and removing prejudices on that all-important topic.”⁶⁶ A veritable treasure trove of material for revival historians, the recorded lectures provide a window into the worldview of Scottish evangelical ministers of the 1830s and 1840s. As seven of the fifteen ministers who either gave lectures or

⁶⁴ W.M. Hetherington, “A Brief Account,” 659.

⁶⁵ MacKenzie, *Episode*, 35.

⁶⁶ W.M. Hetherington, preface to *The Revival of Religion: Addresses by Scottish Evangelical Leaders delivered in Glasgow in 1840* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1984), xxix.

prefaced the collection were also contributors to *The Scottish Christian Herald*, there is little room for doubt that the proceedings represented the views of Neil MacKenzie.⁶⁷

First, the ministers defined revival. Hetherington, in the preface, said it was “an unusual manifestation of the power of the grace of God in convincing and converting careless sinners, and in quickening and increasing the faith and piety of believers.”⁶⁸ For Rev. John Bonar, brother of the famous hymn writer,

The very expression speaks of life – of life possessed, or of life offered – but of life decaying, or gone from where it once was, or not found where it should be. The quickening to newness of life where life has once been, and been in vigor, is therefore the first and most obvious meaning of revival...⁶⁹

Finally, for W.H. Burns, revival was “an unusually successful dispensation of religious ordinances, the effect of a copious effusion of the influences of Divine grace...”⁷⁰ Taken together, in 1840s Scotland an evangelical revival encompassed both new conversion and the rededication or renewal of dormant piety. Further, a revival was characteristically “unusual” in its scope and impact.

There was also considerable consensus as to appropriate manifestations and their course of duration. For Hetherington, “A considerable degree of excitement in such circumstances is perfectly inevitable,” yet by no means necessary to constitute revival. Bonar agreed that revivals could, though did not have to, be marked by “much excitement, great anxiety to hear the word preached, deep impression under it, and such

⁶⁷ Currie, “The Growth of Evangelicalism,” 445-472. They were: Rev. R.S. Candlish of Edinburgh, who founded *The Scottish Christian Herald* and wrote 17 articles for it between 1836-1840; Rev. John G. Lorimer of St. David’s, who wrote 28 articles for 1836 and 1841; Rev. Charles J. Brown of Edinburgh, who wrote 6 articles in 1836, 1838-1841; Rev. William Burns of Kilsyth, who wrote 7 articles between 1837-1839; Rev. John M’Naughtan of Paisley, who wrote 1 article in 1839; Rev. Dr. Paterson of St. Andrew’s, who wrote 2 articles in 1839; Rev. William Maxwell Hetherington (preface), who wrote 13 articles between 1837-1841.

⁶⁸ W.M. Hetherington, preface to *The Revival of Religion*, x.

⁶⁹ Rev. John Bonar, “Lecture I,” in *The Revival of Religion*, 5-6.

⁷⁰ Rev. William Hamilton Burns, “Lecture XI,” in *The Revival of Religion*, 332.

affections of the bodily frame as such an agitated mind will often occasion.”⁷¹ Yet he carefully noted that “every revival in its later stages has come to be without” as many outward signs.⁷² In sum, for Rev. Neil MacKenzie revival was far from arbitrary or ambiguous. He knew, as those ministers in Glasgow, how to separate the wheat from the chaff and what counted as a true awakening.

Assessment

John Donne famously wrote, “No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.”⁷³ In the case of St. Kilda in 1841-1842, even though the revival occurred on an island, the event itself was clearly “part of the main.” Neil MacKenzie had numerous connections off the island, both direct and indirect, that enabled him to stay aware of the ecclesiastical climate in the 1830s and 1840s. These connections not only kept him up to date on issues of revival, but they also helped him navigate the rough waters of Disruption. Likewise, the revival movement itself, though locally driven and insularly distinct, shared vast similarities with both regional and national awakenings of the same ilk. Was the St. Kildan experience unique? Of course. But it was also part of a grander narrative that transcended the walls of the island church.

⁷¹ Rev. John Bonar, “Lecture I,” in *The Revival of Religion*, 28.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 29.

⁷³ John Donne, “Meditation XVII.”

CHAPTER FOUR

CONTEXT, HISTORIOGRAPHY, AND METHODOLOGY

As with the third, this final chapter seeks to provide more contexts within which to view and understand the introduction of evangelicalism, cultural transformation, and revival on the island of St. Kilda between 1822 and 1844. To that end, part one of what follows attempts a survey of the landscape of evangelicalism within the Scottish Church, both nationally and in the Highlands and Islands particularly, between 1630 and 1850. Part two engages the questions of historical interpretation and research methodology. It is the author's sincere hope that the following chapter helps both to further locate the St. Kildan events historically and encourage the reader to explore other aspects of Scottish religious history.

The Scottish Church

From the seventeenth century on into the middle of the nineteenth, the Church of Scotland underwent considerable change, culminating explosively in the Disruption of 1843 and subsequent formation of the Free Church of Scotland by members of the former Popular (or Evangelical) Party of the Establishment. As controversial as it was, division came part and parcel with the Church of Scotland in the early-modern era. After the Scottish Reformation of 1560, an initial divide arose as the heirs of the Presbyterian churchmen of the Knoxian ilk contended with Episcopalians for ecclesiastical dominance.¹ In Brown's estimation, "Presbyterian churchmen were sensible of the need for a civil magistrate to govern society and defend the church, but independence from his

¹ Callum G. Brown, *Religion and Society in Scotland Since 1730* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 14.

intrusion was jealously guarded.”² As a result of such tension over church polity, in the eighteenth century a more formalized party divide appeared. On one side were the Evangelicals of the Popular party, strongly Calvinist, Presbyterian, and resistant to the patronage of parish clergy by the landed elite. On the other side were the so-called “Moderates,” known for their association with the Whig government and heavily influenced theologically by Enlightenment ideals. It was the issue of patronage, however, that finally severed their ties. During the Ten Years’ Conflict (1834-1843), the ascendant Evangelicals were eventually defeated, as the courts declared the Veto Act of 1834 unfounded. On May 18, 1843, the Evangelicals walked out of the General Assembly to form the Free Church.³ However, evangelicalism transcended party lines, both before and after Disruption.

A word with etymological roots meaning “good news,” evangelicalism was (and continues to be) an international phenomenon of post-Enlightenment popular Protestantism since the early decades of the eighteenth century.⁴ In a broad sense, the movement has been defined, in historian David Bebbington’s assessment, by: “conversionism, the belief that lives need to be changed; activism, the expression of the gospel in effort; Biblicism, a particular regard for the Bible; and what may be called crucicentrism, a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross.”⁵ Both ecclesiastical and

² Ibid., 17.

³ Ibid., 17-22.

⁴ This periodization is, of course, contested. For example, see A.T.B. McGowan, “Evangelicalism in Scotland from Knox to Cunningham,” in *The Advent of Evangelicalism: Exploring Historical Continuities*, eds. Michael A.G. Haykin and Kenneth J. Stewart (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2008), 63-83. My framework, however, is the widely-held view from David W. Bebbington’s landmark *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 1.

⁵ Bebbington, *Evangelicalism*, 2-3. In “Evangelicalism in Modern Scotland,” *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 9-1-Spring 1991, 4-12, Bebbington draws a helpful distinction between Evangelicals, in his estimation those holding orthodoxy and Enlightenment in the same hand, and “Traditional

social historians echo these traits in specific reference to Scottish evangelicals.⁶ Crucial to what happened on St. Kilda, Burleigh further notes, “Their aim was to awaken in their hearers a deeper knowledge of religious experience.”⁷

For much of the history of Presbyterian Scotland, the manner in which some of the most notable “religious experiences” came to pass related directly to the observance of the Lord’s Supper, or Communion. In reaction against the imposition of kneeling to receive the sacrament, an action that smacked of undue Episcopal oversight and popery to the pious Calvinist Scots, the Presbyterians of the seventeenth century protested through preaching and holding “sacramental occasions” in otherwise unorthodox locales such as open fields and barns. In the words of one scholar, “Soon their resistance to Episcopalian forms had issued in a Presbyterian awakening.”⁸ At a notable communion at the kirk of Shotts, in Lanarkshire, as many as five hundred people experienced “conversion or confirmation” over a multi-day period of preaching by the itinerant John Livingston.⁹ From their incipience at Shotts, these events “continued to underpin Scottish patterns of renewal and piety amid the eighteenth-century Evangelical Revival.”¹⁰ Though as a general trend the sacramental affairs began to wane in significance and popularity by the middle of the nineteenth century, in some particular areas the tradition continued,

Protestants,” or those with hardline Westminster affiliation such as the heirs of the Cameronians. For the most part, the Evangelicals discussed herein will be those of the first type.

⁶ See T.M. Devine, *The Scottish Nation: 1700-2007* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), 370; J.H.S. Burleigh, *A Church History of Scotland* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), 328.

⁷ Burleigh, *Church History*, 328.

⁸ Leigh E. Schmidt, “Time, Celebration, and the Christian Year in Eighteenth-Century Evangelicalism,” in *Evangelicalism: Comparative Studies of Popular Protestantism in North America, the British Isles, and Beyond, 1700-1990*, ed. Mark A. Noll, David W. Bebbington, and George A. Rawlyk, 90-109 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 95.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

including parts of the Highlands and Islands.¹¹ In sum, the evangelical, experiential faith of early-modern and modern Scotland was both unique in its role in Scottish church life and a part of a larger, international movement with specific characteristics.

Evangelicalism and Revivalism in the Highlands and Islands: ca. 1630-1800

Though the Highlands and Islands became known for a certain amount of evangelical vibrancy in the period roughly between 1790 and 1850, the movement had roots deep down into the seventeenth century.¹² John MacInnes locates a number a smaller, less pronounced revivals in the Highlands from the period of James VI, through the Restoration, and on into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As with the kirk of Shotts and later Cambuslang revival of 1742, these northern awakenings were also characteristically associated with communion seasons.¹³ Unlike their Lowland brethren, however, the Highland evangelicals also held to a distinct set of theological beliefs and fostered piety through Gaelic-speaking catechists and indigenous lay leaders known as “the Men”.

In the Highlands, “the sacrament was the center of the spiritual life of the people.”¹⁴ Though observed by only a few members and rarely more than twice a year, the general spiritual anxiety produced by the occasions acted in many cases as a catalyst

¹¹ Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Holy Fairs: Scotland and the Making of American Revivalism*, 2nd. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 205-206.

¹² Geographically, the Highlands and Islands are that northern and northwestern region of Scotland divided by the “Highland line” on the mainland and stretching from Islay to Lewis in the Western Isles. See Donald E. Meek, *The Scottish Highlands: The Churches and Gaelic Culture* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1996), 1.

¹³ John MacInnes, *The Evangelical Movement in the Highlands of Scotland* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1951), 154-158.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

for revival.¹⁵ The fellowship meetings, also common in other evangelical contexts, further solidified the Highland movement during its initial phase.¹⁶ These congregational meetings that punctuated the weekly or monthly lives of the church “set the spiritual standard in a parish” and centered on prayer and Biblical exposition.¹⁷ Both of these phenomena also carried on into the nineteenth-century evangelical Highlands and played a key role in the emergence of the revival on St. Kilda under the ministry of Rev. Neil MacKenzie.

The Highland evangelicals, for the most part, retained what scholar John MacInnes locates as “confessional orthodoxy”.¹⁸ First, the Highland evangelicals largely retained the classic Reformed understanding of law and grace, whereby man’s effort plays no part whatsoever in the attainment of salvation.¹⁹ Assurance of saving faith, likewise, was held to be a product of the blessing of election, though anxiety often remained as individuals sought to secure it. Somewhat deviant from the model of Westminster punctiliousness, the Highland evangelicals of the eighteenth century shared in the sentiment of the “Marrow” tradition in offering the gospel freely to all and lessening the rhetoric of eternal damnation.

Like the evangelical movement as a whole, they also placed high value on the experience of conversion. The Highlanders still held to a gradual, more Puritan conversion that emphasized the mortification of the flesh before the more joyous heights

¹⁵ Ibid. This being said, Elizabeth Ritchie helpfully notes that, “Although some notable revivals occurred at communions, such as the one at Cambuslang, and the sacrament was used to reach the unconverted as well as encourage believers, communions were not primarily revivalist events.” See Elizabeth Ritchie, “The faith of the crofters: Skye and South Uist, 1793-1843.” (PhD diss., University of Guelph, 2010), 154-155.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ J. MacInnes, *Evangelicalism*, 171.

¹⁹ The word “man,” in this case, refers to women as well. A more modern, gender-inclusive interpretation would be “humanity.”

of spiritual rebirth. Those converted and saved would continue in a life of sanctification and persevere with the other saints. As seen before, “the Men” also held high the sacramental grace of the Lord’s Supper. Finally, and perhaps the most specific to the Highlands and Islands, the evangelicals held certain beliefs regarding “the secret of the Lord.” Though usually the provenance of highly regarded laymen, such as “the Men,” and the clergy, this more supernatural element of Highland evangelical theology manifested itself in specially inspired interpretations or applications of Scripture, prophecy, and “a divination of the secrets of the heart.”²⁰ Many of these tenets, again, became evident throughout later periods and specifically within the ministry and life of the church on St. Kilda.

Two further unique characteristics of the initial phase of Highland evangelicalism and revivalism relate specifically to the indigenization of the movement into Gaelic culture. The first endeavor, though initiated largely through the efforts of Lowland church societies and government appeals like the Society in Scotland for Propagating Christian Knowledge (SSPCK) and Royal Bounty of 1728, was the use of Gaelic-speaking catechists to bring the Presbyterian and evangelical message to the people of the Highlands and Islands, often considered both “uncivilized” and in danger of perpetuating Catholicism and “ignorance.” Due to the enormity of parish size in many parts of the Highlands, the people rarely if ever had exposure to evangelical preaching and the rudiments of English and/or Gaelic literacy. By employing these catechists to preach and teach in the vernacular, evangelicalism slowly began to seep into the fabric of Gaelic society through linguistic and catechetical methods. These men, known as *ceistear* locally, “became one of the most familiar figures in Highland congregations, and very often, his

²⁰ Ibid., 180-192.

homely piety, his power in prayer, his pithy elucidations of Scripture and Catechism won him the love and respect of the people.”²¹

The second indigenous aspect of Highland evangelicalism that came to prominence in the period before the greater revival movements of the nineteenth century was *na Daoine*, or “the Men.” Named as such in order to differentiate them from the clergymen, “the Men” were “an order of evangelical laymen, venerated for their godliness, to whom alone was given the privilege of speaking at the Friday ‘Question Meetings’ at a Highland Sacrament.”²² Beyond the distinction of speaking and leading the fellowship meetings and playing a role in the communion season, MacInnes notes several distinguishing marks of “the Men.”

First, “the Men” were fluent in Scripture with impressive mnemonic prowess. This resulted in many cases in a tendency toward “allegorical interpretations” and “mystical modes of speech.”²³ As the prayer and fellowship meetings were central to their communal roles, they were also revered for their power of prayer. In a similar vein, they further claimed to experience both supernatural abilities and spiritual warfare. They were also masters of discipline. The fact that the Highlands and Islands even today retain a Sabbatarian reputation owes itself in many ways to the high attention to Sabbath observance by “the Men.” In what today might seem a spiritually elitist practice, they also kept very close watch over who was in or out according to their expectations of Christian piety and belief. As for the laity, “the Men” often required long “probationary periods” for new church members. On the other hand, they were also highly critical of Moderate clergy. Closely connected via mutual relationships and a distinctive older style

²¹ J. MacInnes, *Evangelicalism*, 197-211.

²² *Ibid.*, 211-212.

²³ *Ibid.*, 215.

of dress, “the Men” remained a force within Highland evangelicalism into the modern era and were crucial to the heightened awakenings of the nineteenth century.²⁴

As the eighteenth century wore on, a few notable Highland revival movements began to appear on the scene. In 1739, for instance, a revival in Easter Ross created a “spiritual ‘stir among the people’,” yet failed to achieve the trans-regional impact of Cambuslang in the Lowlands.²⁵ Toward the end of the century, however, what was latent and local within the Highland evangelicalism of the past began to erupt into full-blown awakening. Though several of the defining traits from the seventeenth and eighteenth century remained prevalent, the new methods and new personalities of the nineteenth century created an atmosphere in which revival thrived.

Evangelicalism and Revivalism in the Highlands and Islands: ca. 1800-1850

The elements from the first phase of Highland evangelicalism that retained their relevance included “the Men” and communion seasons. Devine describes *na Daoine* as the “successors of the tacksmen of the clan society in terms of their eventual social influence, and a major factor in converting entire communities to evangelical Protestantism in the first half of the nineteenth century.”²⁶ Also of critical relevance to

²⁴ J. MacInnes, *Evangelicalism*, 215-220.

²⁵ Michael Lynch, *Scotland: A New History* (London: Pimlico, 2010), 364-365.

²⁶ Devine, *The Scottish Nation*, 373. Regarding the tacksmen concept, Allan I. MacInnes notes: “As the clan tacksmen were being phased out on the break-up of traditional townships to create crofting communities as well as sheep farms and cattle ranches, the men became the self-perpetuating spiritual tacksmen for the north and north-west Highlands.” From “Evangelical Protestantism in the nineteenth century Highlands,” in *Sermons and Battle Hymns: Protestant Popular Culture in Modern Scotland* ed. Graham Walker and Tom Gallagher (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990), 52.

the St. Kilda context, in the nineteenth century “the Men” began to spread westward into the Hebrides from the northeastern Highlands where they originated.²⁷

Communion also retained significance. These “biannual happenings for the godly to affirm their evangelical faith through Christian fellowship, prayer and contemplation” took on a new dynamic as the parochial leadership continued a stringent “fencing of the table.”²⁸ As Donald Meek notes, “The particularly sacred significance attached to the Lord’s supper in Highland evangelicalism since 1800 is largely responsible for the small size of communicant membership in most of the Presbyterian churches in the region.”²⁹ This explanation makes sense of the seemingly unaccountable difference between members and adherents in the church records of the era. For the 1830s, Allan MacInnes charts the parish of Kilmuir on Skye to have 700 adherents with only 81 members, with an even more drastic ratio of 450:12 in the Lewis parish of Barvas.³⁰ When the Highland Evangelicals went out nearly exclusively with the Free Church in the Disruption, these strict practices of demarcation continued into the next century.³¹ In sum, the spread of “the Men” and the continued use of communion seasons in nineteenth-century Highland evangelicalism evidenced the chronological fluidity of the movement.

²⁷ James Hunter, *The Making of the Crofting Community* (Edinburgh: John Donald Publishers Ltd., 1978), 100.

²⁸ A.I. MacInnes, “Evangelical Protestantism in the nineteenth century Highlands,” in *Sermons and Battle Hymns: Protestant Popular Culture in Modern Scotland* ed. Graham Walker and Tom Gallagher (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990), 49-50.

²⁹ Donald E. Meek, *The Scottish Highlands: The Churches and Gaelic Culture* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1996), 31-32.

³⁰ A.I. MacInnes, “Evangelical Protestantism in the nineteenth century Highlands,” 50. He accounts for this data with a footnote that reads: “Figures collated from digests in *Commissioners for Religious Instruction* (P.P. 1837, IV), appendix 2, 6, 12, 36, 46, 72, 126, 146, 148, 174, 178, 182, 222, 230, 234. Figures for habitual attendance are estimates. Population figures are based on 1831 census with adjustments made for subsequent immigration in and out of the parishes.”

³¹ *Ibid.*, 51.

The period following 1790 also saw an enormous amount of change. Donald Meek brilliantly summarizes the period by noting that, “The availability of the Gaelic Bible, the mobility of the missionaries and evangelists and the growing desire of the people to hear preachers, produced deep spiritual awakenings in the Highlands in the nineteenth century.”³² First, the Gaelic Bible became more widely available. Though the catechists of the earlier period were often fluent in Gaelic, until 1767 the New Testament was unavailable in the Highlanders’ mother tongue. The 1767 SSPCK version, translated by James Stewart of Killin, with the aid of Gaelic religious poet Dugald Buchanan, was followed with an Old Testament in 1801 and a completed edition in 1828.³³ Though only 10,000 copies of the 1767 edition were distributed by the SSPCK, by 1836 there were 60,000 Gaelic Bibles and 80,000 New Testaments in the hands of the Scripture-hungry Highlanders.³⁴

Right along with and directly related to the increased availability of Scripture, a renewed evangelization and education effort was launched, primarily by Lowland organizations, around the turn of the century. Scholars identify a number of causes. On one hand, the evangelicals of the Lowlands began to view the Highlanders as “home heathen.”³⁵ This should be viewed contextually, as it occurred with the rise of general missionary impulse toward parts of the world like William Carey’s India of 1793.³⁶ Furthermore, a major way in which the members of Lowland charitable bodies expressed

³² Donald E. Meek, “Gaelic Bible, revival and mission: the spiritual rebirth of the nineteenth-century Highlands,” in *The Church in the Highlands*, ed. James Kirk, 114-145 (Edinburgh: Scottish Church History Society, 1998), 144.

³³ John MacKay, *The Church in the Highlands: or the Progress of Evangelical Religion in Gaelic Scotland, 1563-1843* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1914), 234-235.

³⁴ John MacKay, *The Church in the Highlands*, 234-235; Ritchie, “Faith of the crofters,” 100-101.

³⁵ Ritchie, “Faith of the crofters,” 100-101.

³⁶ Meek, *Churches and Gaelic Culture*, 25.

their religious philanthropy was through the purchasing and printing of more Gaelic Bibles.³⁷

This movement continued beyond the donation of Bibles and religious books through a renewed effort to catechize and evangelize the Highlands in Gaelic. This process took time and involved a number of players. First on the scene were the brothers James Alexander Haldane and Robert Haldane. Members of a wealthy family, their initial dreams of international missions were foiled. Not to be deterred, they turned their attention toward the Highland “mission field” by founding a Society for the Propagation of the Gospel at Home (SPGH) in 1798.³⁸ The SPGH missionaries were canvassing the Highlands and Islands within a matter of months. As Devine notes, “Preachers were itinerant, the Christian message was conveyed in Gaelic, a direct appeal was made to the emotions and tracts were widely distributed to maintain spiritual interest when the missionaries moved on.”³⁹ However, the Haldane brothers hamstrung their efforts by adopting Congregationalism and credo-baptism in 1799.⁴⁰

Continuing the efforts of the SPGH, a number of Gaelic School Societies were founded in the second decade of the nineteenth century.⁴¹ As described by MacKay in a hagiographic, yet nevertheless colorful manner, these new societies were “the best proof of the reality and beneficent influences of the Awakening.”⁴² The Gaelic School Societies did in fact take up the banner of the earlier charitable societies with admirable results. By teaching Gaelic alone, the missionaries of the Edinburgh Gaelic School Society, founded

³⁷ Ritchie, “Faith of the crofters,” 100-101.

³⁸ MacKay, *The Church in the Highlands*, 223-227.

³⁹ Devine, *The Scottish Nation*, 373.

⁴⁰ MacKay, *The Church in the Highlands*, 229.

⁴¹ James Hunter, *The Making of the Crofting Community*, 98.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 232.

in 1811, had 77 schools with 4300 pupils by 1825. Though they taught both English and Gaelic, the agents of the Glasgow Gaelic School Society, founded in 1812, had 48 schools by 1825.⁴³ By focusing “solely on the basic vernacular literacy with the prime aim of evangelizing the Highlanders,” the GSS schools encountered more evangelical success than the SSPCK schools of the previous century by channeling their energy into catechesis and Scripture memorization, focusing geographically on the Hebridean region, and maintaining three-year residencies per location over and against the permanence of the SSPCK schoolmasters.⁴⁴ The final manifestation of Lowland evangelistic energy was the increasing Evangelical presence within the Established Church.⁴⁵ The Rev. John MacDonald of Ferintosh, who played a major role in the St. Kilda revival, was known far and wide for his engaging preaching and evangelization.⁴⁶ Taken together, as Meek noted, the rise of Biblical literacy in the vernacular and the burst of evangelistic energy from the Lowlands set the stage for a period of increased spiritual awakening.

Though the following historiographical survey provides more nuance, a brief look at the revivalism that resulted from the energies of local and foreign evangelicals during both periods in question is necessary here in order to round out the historical context. Meek notes, “The revival movements were the crest of a spiritual wave, so to speak, which had been growing in power from the time that the Highlands became the focus of missionary endeavor.”⁴⁷ Indeed the growth of revival within Highland evangelicalism continued the tradition of Easter Ross (1739) and Moulin (1799), while also going

⁴³ MacKay, *The Church in the Highlands*, 232.

⁴⁴ Ritchie, “Faith of the crofters,” 110-116.

⁴⁵ Meek, *Churches and Gaelic Culture*, 30. Also see David A. Currie. 1990. “The Growth of Evangelicalism in the Church of Scotland, 1793-1843.” PhD diss., University of St. Andrews, Scotland.

⁴⁶ Meek, *Churches and Gaelic Culture*, 30

⁴⁷ Meek, “Gaelic Bible,” 115.

beyond them in effect and impact. As we have seen, the Isle of Skye saw two large revival movements in 1812 and 1842, along with Lewis, Harris, St. Kilda and other mainland parishes throughout the period.⁴⁸

Typically highly emotive, often the source of initial conversion, and variously attended by crowds from under one hundred to thousands, the Highland revivals of the nineteenth century tapped into the supernatural awareness of the Highlanders and Islanders and supplemented the otherwise sober spiritual disciplines of prayer and Scripture reading.⁴⁹ Though always expressing local variations, the revivals often spread from parish to parish, Lowlands to Highlands, and island to island as communication technology increased and ministers assisted their peers in revival services.⁵⁰ Though invariably viewed by the participants as acts of God, there were certain external triggers typically present: “a gathering of like-minded people with a clear sense of unfulfilled religious purpose” and “the presence of a strong authority-figure who could help them to achieve a sense of fulfillment.”⁵¹ The spiritual/emotional results of these revivals, known as “manifestations,” included “weeping, shouting, prophecy, laughter or falling down in a trance-like state.”⁵² Despite immediate reactions, however, the Highland evangelical leadership was wary to judge a revival successful unless the converts continued in their professions.⁵³ Such was the case, indeed, with Rev. Neil MacKenzie of St. Kilda. By the time of the St. Kilda revival in 1841-1842, evangelicalism and revivalism had already been ingrained in the ethos of Gaelic religious life.

⁴⁸ Ritchie, “Faith of the crofters,” 154-155.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 134-135, 153.

⁵⁰ Meek, “Gaelic Bible,” 119-120

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 117-118, 123.

⁵² Ritchie, “Faith of the crofters,” 147.

⁵³ Meek, “Gaelic Bible,” 129.

Historiography: Patterns and Models in the Study of Revival

Over the past three centuries, revival movements both broadly and in Scotland particularly have exhibited certain patterns. In the assessment of these movements, primarily over the last century, historians and other scholars have likewise understood various factors and causes in order to account for the nature and timing of revivals. First, the terms “revival,” “revivalism,” and “awakening” themselves need to be understood. Many historians disagree on the usage and meaning these terms. “Revival” and “awakening,” for David Bebbington, are synonymous and “events in which there was normally a twofold effect: the rousing of those who were already believers and the decisive turning of unbelievers to the Christian faith.”⁵⁴ He further notes that the term has been used to describe smaller, seemingly “spontaneous events,” organized movements designed to inspire reaction and commitment (sometimes associated with “revivalism” due to the use of human means), or both national and international movements of lasting cultural significance.⁵⁵ For McLoughlin, however, “revivalism” encompasses much of what Bebbington would locate as “revival,” and “awakenings” differ from “revivals” in that they are “periods of cultural revitalization that begin in a general crisis of beliefs and values and extend over a period of a generation or so, during which time a profound reorientation in beliefs and values takes place.”⁵⁶ For the purpose of clarity, I have assumed throughout the thesis the use of Bebbington’s more inclusive “revival” definition and specified when necessary.

⁵⁴ David Bebbington, *Victorian Religious Revivals: Culture and Piety in Local and Global Contexts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 1.

⁵⁵ Bebbington, *Victorian Revivals*, 3.

⁵⁶ William G. McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform: An Essay on Religion and Social Change in America, 1607-1977* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), xiii.

Both Bebbington and Kenneth Jeffrey have studied the ways in which particular patterns of revival have emerged over the past three centuries. Bebbington locates these movements broadly, while Jeffrey relates them to uniquely Scottish trends. The helpful historiographical surveys of these two scholars facilitate a greater understanding of the history of the movement(s) that directly impacted St. Kilda. The first distinct revival pattern to appear was the “Presbyterian model” already discussed, such as kirk of Shotts. Characteristic of this pattern was, as we have seen, gradual conversion, communion festivals, an emphasis on teaching and praying before and after revival, parochial control, less enthusiastic manifestations, and a typically Westminster-heavy theological foundation.⁵⁷ In Scotland, this first pattern centered typically on a specific locality and endured for longer periods of time. Toward the end of the era, however, more physical manifestations began to appear, such as fainting or crying out. Jeffrey contends that the Cambuslang revival of 1742 was the transitional movement from this earlier form of revival into a more trans-regional form.⁵⁸ This first pattern failed to endure as the sacramental element became less and less a part of the revivals.⁵⁹

A second pattern appeared around the same time and had many of the same characteristics as the “Presbyterian model.” A key distinction, though, was the replacement of communion services with preaching as the primary means of encouraging belief. As such, it was not as much a presence in Scotland.⁶⁰

A third pattern appeared then with a strongly Methodist ethos. In much of the British North Atlantic this movement was marked by the rise of lay itinerancy and

⁵⁷ Bebbington, *Victorian Revivals*, 4-5.

⁵⁸ Kenneth S. Jeffrey, *When the Lord Walked the Land: The 1858-62 Revival in the North East of Scotland* (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2002), 4-9.

⁵⁹ Bebbington, *Victorian Revivals*, 6.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

heightened emotional response.⁶¹ Though Methodism itself only impacted Scotland heavily in a handful of areas, the methods of revival espoused by those of Wesleyan heritage were adopted to great effect in Scotland. Aimed at the Highlands and Islands and carried out at the hands of dissenting clergy like the Haldane brothers and other itinerant preachers, this particular form of revival had several notable characteristics. Unlike the earlier centuries, conversion became a shorter affair without the soul-searching prerequisites imposed in earlier times. Concurrently, the revivals themselves were shorter in length. Also, many of the people involved, namely Highlanders, had preexisting cultural dispositions that enabled the supernatural message of the itinerants to find a captive and responsive audience. Finally, this newer form of the movement was associated in Scotland with increasing amounts of physical manifestations. It is primarily within this model and period of revival that the major Highland movements between 1790 and 1850 and, critically, that of St. Kilda can be located. Yet this pattern, too, was not to last, as it eventually “served to alienate many Christians from religious movements.”⁶²

A fourth pattern of revival emerged and thrived during the nineteenth century. This “synthetic approach” to revival adapted tenets of the previous trends, while also moving in a more organized direction. Perhaps the most famous of this school on the international scene was Charles Grandison Finney.⁶³ In his *Lectures on Revival of Religion*, Finney defined a revival as “naturally a result of the use of appropriate means . . . it consists entirely in the right exercise of the powers of nature.”⁶⁴ Indeed, as a result of

⁶¹ Ibid., 9.

⁶² Jeffrey, *When the Lord Walked the Land*, 2, 9-14.

⁶³ Bebbington, *Victorian Revivals*, 11-12.

⁶⁴ Quoted in Jeffrey, *When the Lord Walked the Land*, 14-15.

the Enlightenment, the belief in the supernatural gave way to an emphasis on nature and reason. With the rise of these “shorter, organized periods of intense evangelism that focused on specially arranged events,” evangelicalism in urban Scotland hit a high point in the 1870s with the arrival of American evangelists D.L. Moody and Ira Sankey.⁶⁵ In sum, revivals and revivalism have undergone several stages of historical development.

The historical interpretation of revivals has also gone through several notable phases. One scholar notes: “A substantial historical, sociological and theological literature has been generated in attempts to explain and contextualize revivals.”⁶⁶ First, the majority of early literature on revivals and revivalism attributed causation to Providence and recorded the events “in order to encourage more of them.”⁶⁷ The first non-religious interpretation, popular in the earlier part of the twentieth century, attributed revival to psychological factors. In time, both of these early interpretations fell out of common use.⁶⁸

The primary methods of interpretation over the past half-century have been based variously on a framework Bebbington describes as “religion and society.” Within this broad school of thought, several distinct ideas emerged. Following the popularity of Frederick Jackson Turner’s “frontier thesis” in 1893, his emphasis on westward expansion and building a new society in American history impacted the way in which revivals were seen. This view was subsequently superseded by a myriad of schools emphasizing the social and economic aspects of society in order to account for revivalism. First, a theory of “social control” emerged that thought of revivals as “tools to

⁶⁵ Ibid., 14-18.

⁶⁶ John Wolffe, *The Expansion of Evangelicalism: The Age of Wilberforce, More, Chalmers and Finney* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 88.

⁶⁷ Bebbington, *Victorian Revivals*, 22.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 24-25.

manage the masses.” Then, “Another variant of the ‘religion and society’ model . . . characterized revival as the product of changes associated with the economy.”⁶⁹ Despite the fact that it applied in many cases, this theory of economic rise and fall as a monolithic cause was again broadly declared unreliable. In the words of revival historian Richard Carwardine, “the economic climate was never the primary determining influence over revivalism; rather it served to modify or intensify a revival cycle that had a momentum and life of its own.”⁷⁰ The final “religion and society” trend noted by Bebbington is what he labels “social integration.” According to this school of thought, revivals were “mainstream events consolidating the nations in which they took place.”⁷¹

All of these previous revival interpretations have been put forth in some form or another to understand the revival movements in the Scottish Highlands and Islands. As for the religious interpretation, John MacLeod notes: “Revival came to the cause of the Gospel, and when it came it came from more quarters than one as its proximate source. In the highest sense, of course, it came from above.”⁷² The majority of these interpretations, however, attribute the success of evangelicalism and revival movements in the Highlands and Islands to the major cultural, social, and economic shifts that occurred during the period between 1700 and 1900, namely: the collapse of the clan system as a social structure after the Battle of Culloden in 1746 and ensuing repression of Jacobitism; the abandonment of the Gaels by their hereditary Highland lairds who displaced communities and individuals during the Highland Clearances in the name of economic “improvement”

⁶⁹ Ibid., 26-31.

⁷⁰ Richard Carwardine, *Trans-atlantic Revivalism: Popular Evangelicalism in Britain and America, 1790-1865* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1978), 55.

⁷¹ Bebbington, *Victorian Revivals*, 32.

⁷² John MacLeod, *Scottish Theology, In Relation to Church History Since the Reformation* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1974; orig. pub. 1943), 255.

throughout the nineteenth century; and the development of crofting communities as new social and communal loci.⁷³

The “religion and society” emphasis on the Highlands and Islands has recently been accented, though, with fresh perspectives that encourage nuance. In her recent doctoral work, Elizabeth Ritchie pushed back against the dominant narratives. In reaction to scholars such as James Hunter, she unambiguously states, “Evangelicalism did not succeed because it arrived in a broken society which would absorb any new philosophy offered.”⁷⁴ She further notes:

Materialist assumptions are problematic because if events and phenomena can only be caused by natural forces, like social conditions or psychology, the supernaturalism of the Evangelical Highlands can only be explained if it were a delusional and escapist culture. A mass delusion over half a century seems unlikely and this interpretation fails to take seriously the voices of the people involved.⁷⁵

Indeed, an appropriate interpretive framework for understanding the revival on St. Kilda must account for a number of factors, internal and external, material and spiritual, local and international.⁷⁶

⁷³ These general sentiments can be seen in the work of four historians. Mark Noll: “It was in reconstructing Highland society after the Jacobite rebellion, and then providing security in response to the French Revolution, that evangelicalism became the great, and nearly unchallenged, arbiter of social values in this, the most northern of North Atlantic societies.” See “Evangelical Social Influence in North Atlantic Societies,” in *Evangelicalism: Comparative Studies of Popular Protestantism in North America, the British Isles, and Beyond, 1700-1990*, ed. Mark A. Noll, David W. Bebbington, and George A. Rawlyk, 113-136 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 116; Allan MacInnes: “. . . revivalism cannot be disassociated from the social restlessness occasioned by the clearances and by rural congestion and deprivation within crofting communities.” See “Evangelical Protestantism in the nineteenth century Highlands,” 54; Tom Devine: “The evangelical message gave hope, consolation and spiritual comfort to a people racked by great psychological pressures as their familiar world disintegrated with alarming speed.” See *The Scottish Nation*, 372; and James Hunter: “The origins of this ‘deep and stirring religious awakening’ are to be found in the social and psychological consequences of the collapse of the old order.” See *The Making of the Crofting*, 96.

⁷⁴ Ritchie, “Faith of the crofters,” 83.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 146.

⁷⁶ Jeffrey, *When the Lord Walked the Land*, 37.

Research Methodology

To that end I decided to loosely adopt an alternative framework, developed by David Bebbington in his 2012 *Victorian Religious Revivals*, known as “culture and piety.” A cultural element takes seriously the fact that: “Prevailing opinion, whether customary or theological, lay or clerical, is a significant element in the mix of factors contributing to awakenings.”⁷⁷ This inclusive cultural analysis plays out in a threefold examination of: “the web of attitudes that exist in any social group,” “non-elite patterns of creativity, the various forms of ‘popular culture,’ and ‘elite intellectual developments and the great achievements of civilization in art, music, and literature, what is often called ‘high culture’.”⁷⁸ As a check to the predominance of analyses that fail to pay diligence the spiritual aspects of revival, Bebbington also highlights “piety”: “the devotional expression of lived religion.”⁷⁹ He then sub-categorizes this second crucial element into: “questions of how far emotion prevailed, how far events were spontaneous, and how far lived theology molded events.”⁸⁰ As the reader might note, the “culture and piety” hermeneutic in this thesis most prominently appears in the discussions of cultural transformation and revival manifestations.

⁷⁷ Bebbington, *Victorian Revivals*, 44-45.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 45.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 52.

Conclusion

In a matter of twenty-two years, the faith and culture of the people of St. Kilda changed considerably. First, the itinerating work of John MacDonald with the SSPCK in the 1820s succeeded in introducing the islanders to the evangelical form of Protestant Christianity. His preaching, teaching, and efforts to erect new worship facilities laid the foundations for a viable church future.

Then, in 1830 Rev. Neil MacKenzie arrived from Glasgow to occupy the newly built pulpit. Critically, though, he soon realized that in order to be effective in the pulpit, he needed to work beyond it. Through his teaching to increase literacy, interactions with the local worldview and culture, inclusion of the people in ecclesial affairs, and efforts to improve their material lives, MacKenzie slowly stimulated a transformative indigenization of evangelicalism on the island. In 1841-1842, this transformation resulted in revival.

Similar in both form and substance to historical and contemporary awakening movements in the region and nation, the people of St. Kilda were swept away in what they and their minister perceived to be an outpouring of the Holy Spirit. As with those similar movements, the revival lasted awhile, subsided, and eventually came to an end. The overall effects, in Neil MacKenzie's opinion, were overwhelming positive. Spiritual maturity, moral improvement, and communal solidarity all seemed to increase. In a way, the people of St. Kilda assessed the revival themselves. As Finlay MacQueen's Gaelic advent poem, composed during the winter of revival in 1841-1842, concluded: "Grief was laid and joy was raised."

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